

Call for a new social contract between science and society

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QUESTIONING
CORONA



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a journal which seeks to reflect through free discussion, every shade of Indian thought and aspiration. Each month, a single problem is debated by writers belonging to different persuasions. Opinions expressed have ranged from janata to congress, from sarvodaya to communist to independent. And

the non-political specialist too has voiced his views. In this way it has been possible to answer a real need of today, to gather the facts and ideas of this age and to help thinking people arrive at a certain degree of cohesion and clarity in facing the problems of economics, of politics, of culture.

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733

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a symposium on

the social impact

of the virus

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The problem

NO doubts that the corona epidemic is complex in nature. It evokes what the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss dubbed as a total social fact, a concrete event which connects and unfolds the various aspects of a society in its totality. Such an epic event is not easy to study. At this moment I remember a sage piece of advice I once received. I was told, 'Sometimes, one needs to ramble. A walk is often purposive, a ramble gives you a dream time, allows you to float, waiting for surprises.' This essay is a ramble through the news, the views, and gossip about the Coronavirus. It does not seek immediate solutions, but looks for nuggets and frameworks of understanding.

Nature has always inspired performances, magnificent narratives, whether it incarnates itself as a deluge, an eclipse, or a virus. Whether it was the great flood, the iceage, or the bubonic plague, it has shaped history and controlled our imaginations. Of late man has been contemptuous of nature and read the medieval plague as a thing of the past, while it is an imagination that should continue to haunt us.

One of the first things one notices about the Coronavirus is the narrow, restrictive glossary employed to understand it. In India, it is not portrayed as a riddle or a mystery, but strangely as a secular problem that threatened the competence and functioning of governments. In fact, governance reduces it to an exercise in problem solving or policy allocations. One senses a failure of language and imagination here because the virus broke through the everydayness of being, playing Humpty Dumpty with everything we took for granted. Our pretended hubris of the lockdown which we presented Guinness Book style, reflected more an illiteracy of history and language, and lacked a sense of the deeper metaphysics of life and death. We seem to

ignore the symbolism of death and dying. There is little sense of the collective mourning in the everyday litany of statistics. There is no language of loss, at best an empty hubris of control. Even nature in its polysemy is seen as a law and order problem.

Given this liability, the Corona chronicle has to be read twice, once in the language of power and governance, and once again as a reflection on everydayness groping for new categories.

A crisis can either approve paradigms or reinforce stereotypes, but either way, the crisis as a phenomena makes you reflect on thought, on the ways of thinking. The Corona as a crisis is still unfolding, but right now, it reveals a rush to stereotype. But stereotype, rather than exacerbating the crisis, becomes a Linus blanket, whose intellectual security and warmth sustains habitual thought and becomes a social consolation. At the present stage, the Coronavirus reveals the larger life power of standard modes of thought.

A reading of Peter Drucker helps at this point. Drucker, a doyen of organizational thought once made a fascinating distinction between leadership and management, an observation which looks like a play of words but has profound consequences, as it unravels in daily life. Drucker claimed that a leader is one who does the right thing, while a manager is one who does things right. The manager emphasizes the tactical, he plays safe, where a leader confronts a more open-ended experimental world which involves risk. A manager is instrumental, and literally conveys a sense of impression management. One was pondering over Drucker's distinction as one listened to Modi's first speech declaring a lockdown. One expected leadership, but what one received was a managerial exercise, the absence of ideas beyond the panopticonization of

spaces. There was a gimmickyness in the plate-beating ritual, evocative of the Swadeshi movement but empty of ideas and idealism. There was little attempt to think of healthcare, ethics, and the varieties of suffering the closure would create. The speech verged on the correct, but not on the true. Truth hurts, it opens you up to new possibilities and it demands rethinking. One of the interesting things is that people felt Modi had to look decisive, and make decisive moves to prove he is in-charge. All one wanted was a piece of drama. Modi recited the lines as if by rote.

In one sense, Modi is a collection of stereotypes of the kind of authoritarianism India wants to see in power. Whether it is a rocket launch, an act of demonetization, or a lockdown, there is a technocratic machismo to the act. No one asks whether the act is a civil act or of power. The decisiveness of the image was critical, one had to convey a sense of being in control. But whether the lockdown worked or not was secondary. It was as if the virus was being subject to a law and order solution. Public health, unfortunately, is more complex than that.

The logic was simple. The virus created a state of emergency, a situation which demanded an unprecedented exercise of power. The virus, in the words of the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, created a state of exception, a state where democracy could be suspended and treated as secondary. Two questions most of us refused to ask at that time are: why do we take such authoritarianism for granted, as an intelligent response to a situation? Second, we do not notice that our democracy, already majoritarian in its idiocy, is an assemblage of evolving authoritarianisms, from CAA in Assam to AFSPA in Manipur, to the brutality of Kashmir, and the lockdown in the Corona. We seem to assume authori-

tarianism is apt, because it possesses a kind of cybernetic intelligence to handle the emergency. What we acquire is not immunity to a virus, but a gradual and accumulated immunity to a democracy as a way of life. Our fetish for the magic of decisiveness adds to it.

The problem stems from the way we construct Modi. When we analyse Modi, we miss out on the genres of literature and philosophy. What we confront is the immediacy of journalism, and the factuality of social science. Both seek the factual, but by listing facts we miss out on the truth. We see a political creature, a policymaker, and we measure Modi in indices as a measure, and a number, but we do not see him as a metaphor. There is an assemblage of acts, but an absence of imagination. The mediocrity that Modi has added to the country is not just intellectual, it is ethical, aesthetic, and linguistic. We keep incarnating Modi as a managerial exercise, a crude outline of problem solving. Consider Modi's speech on the Coronavirus. It was overpowering in its inanity, but exquisite in its impression management. He asked everyone to drum plates to all of the workers, and little was said about the suffering, about the disaster called the informal economy.

The middle class echoes Modi. It is a meeting of comfort zones of the intellect. One wishes there was a Robert Conquest to analyse Modi, instead of bureaucrats from our planning commission. In fact, Robert Conquest, in assessing Stalinism, made a point that deserves to be emphasized. He said, 'Americans were studying Stalin gathered intelligence, yet not all the facticity of intelligence provided insights into the evil of the Stalinist regime.' Similarly, not all the policy analysis of our social scientists makes a critique of Modi. There is a failure of a moral imagination which only the great literature or a new social science can cure.

The Coronavirus has, in fact, provided a new lease of life to the Modi regime. Watching the Janta curfew, the superficiality of the event, one realizes that authoritarianism to rule creates a crust of mediocrity. In Modi's case, he used the greatest good to the greatest number. We need a different language, a different morality to expose Modi.

This partly stems from the fact that we have reduced Modi to a political creature. Modi and Amit Shah ooze the language of politics but little else. One reads little that is literary, or aesthetic, or ethical about them. One can understand the problem of Modi better but one contrasts his career with the rise of Stalinism or Fascism. There it was literature, especially poetry, that provided the acuteness of critique and understanding. Writers grasped the dangers of the fascism of everydayness, where one makes more compromises to adjust with reality. Small adjustments became the order of the day, and as a result, a majority of people adjusted to tyranny. Literature saw through this process acutely, and challenged it persuasively. Sadly, the acuteness of his brand intelligence is foiling a moral critique. In a spirit of adjustment we claim that Modi works so he must be good. When politics becomes managerial or ideological, it loses its sense of ethics. Our habits like our concepts march in uniform to Modi's drum.

The acts of politicians are immediately consumed and interpreted by think tanks, which try to create an intermediate layer of understanding between act and policy. As a collective text, think tanks in India have exercised a fascination which needs to be examined. The power and influence of think tanks reflects the decline of an intellectual community. The academe is virtually missing in policy, media, even TV. What we have instead are policy experts from Centre for Policy Research, Observer Research Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation, creating a moral compass of policy directions and handing out report cards. One has to grant that they have an understanding of power and its idioms and they behave less acrimoniously than the university. There is a more detailed sense of backstage. Generally, the main actors are bureaucrats who have both a sense of power and its absence.

Consider the recent discussion on the state of the world after the Coronavirus between Shivshankar Menon and Shyam Saran. Two formidable people, suave, composed, easy with themselves, one expected much and listened closely. One replayed the discussion wondering whether one had missed something. Both began by discoursing on globalization, highlighting key words like security, borders, and connectivity. Yet both

sounded like dated opeds that meant little. A lot of what they said was empirically true, but fact did not graduate to a framework of meaning. They referred to the blame game country's play. They said they sensed the world as fragmenting. They added the usual wisdom that nations should find in themselves, sources of resonance for recovery. They hinted aptly and profoundly when such an event was the 9/11 of global solidarity.

Two things intrigued one. They spoke common sense, but one had to ask them whether common sense offers insights in a moment of paradigm crisis. Second, they both spoke as generalists, yet the connectivity and thought never came through. A generalist today is an innocuous creature. He lacks connectivity to the systemic power of holism, which integrates knowledge and understanding at different levels. In fact, but by the time they ended, the only profound and welcome thing they said was, 'Stay Home Stay Safe'. I wish they had, because the performance was affably empty. There was little sense of medical discourse, and its connectivity to migration and globalization. One wishes they had speculated about the varieties of time they had to tackle during the crisis, especially the time beyond the short run.

I realized two things at that time. Here were two experienced men confronting the emptiness of the paradigms. They did not state it, but the body language of hesitancy, a rush to closure, revealed the tacit understanding. It was clear that globalization as a value frame was fragmented and empty. Second, nation states have become self-centred, and with the likes of US and Britain, literally parochial, even punitive. One realized, as one watches a fable, about the relation between the paradigm and power system. The very helplessness in articulation of the two senior bureaucrats was revealing. They sensed the end of the paradigm, and they were helpless to articulate the new world beyond cliché. Yet, the honesty lay in their hesitancy, and silence.

Beyond leadership and think tanks, one has to consider the press.

This eventually raises the question of truth and narrative, of the roar of the writer as a journalist, storyteller, scientist, and historian. Two articles of startlingly different style set the tone for the spectrum. The first was by Annie Zaidi, writer and filmmaker. Their style is compact, personal, like a metaphorical housewife cleaning up leftovers. For her, truth begins with the self, with personal honesty and its professional accompaniment. The pandemic leads to self-discovery, of the importance of truth. She refers to the list of evasions, prevarications by citizens, whether consuming para-

cetamol before a flight or bureaucrats helping relatives evade quarantine.

The journalist has to become the truth teller at this moment. A journalism where exaggeration, which paints Modi as a new savant, will not do. Shekhar Gupta and 'The Print' had no recourse to either economy or modesty. He pegs his own article on Gabriel Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, but has little sense of the book. He plays with the title, but he forgets that it is the language and narrative which makes it fascinating. Shekhar Gupta, in fact, should have made a contrast between the magical realism of Marquez and the corporate realism of Narendra Modi. A magical realism tends to show how dictatorships can be surreal entities. If Shekhar Gupta has understood Modi's language, he would have made an interesting contrast between socialist realism and nationalist realism as literary genres. He would have realised that Modi was unconsciously imitating the Stakhanovite, Stalinist language of production statistics, which was used to celebrate Soviet industrialization. Modi was mimicking socialist realism to present epidemic statistics creating a Olympiad around death and its exponential activities. In its attempt to look managerially competent, Modi has created a surrealist language of governance.

By the second fortnight of the virus, the texture of waiting and conversation changes. Modi appears like a replay of a bad play, an extra asked to do a heroic role, and sounding tentative. He thrives on the rhetoric of nationhood evoking an urgent Swadeshi era of togetherness and community, while there is anomie and devastation all around. His speech has no sense of logistics, the responsibility of delivery, questions of transporting migrants, issues of handling human rights violations. I wish he could have taken a leaf out of Fidel Castro's speeches. Once Castro addressed the nation on the issue of milk shortage to the children, explaining the difficulties and apologizing to each child. One cannot see Modi doing such a similar act.

Modi, in fact, tried to emphasize the development metaphor. While India is composed of different economies facing a variety of crisis, Modi created an image of an integrated world economy doing rather well. The Olympics image of a race of nations haunts him, and Modi is more content handing out report cards to himself and the people when facing the concrete hard-headed questions of materiality and decision-making. But there is another emptiness that needs to be talked about. A friend of mine, who is an avid watcher and sensitive critic of news and debates that follow, contrasted Modi's unctuousness on TV with the critics echoing a

holier than thou attitude, that we know more than you. She said, 'No one admits they know little about what is going on. As a result, we have a Punch and Judy show on TV, which is rhetorically empty, and consequently tiring.' She claimed we are poor listeners at best and complained, there is no sense of the constructive vision of the community.

How do we work together? She claimed in that the emptiness of policy has to be met at two levels. First, there has to be an individual act which is ethical. This then has to be scaled up to policy. She gave an example. On a walk back she saw a group distributing food in the slums. The food was packed diligently, and served carefully. She inquired about who was doing it. It was not some big corporate group or politician, it was an ordinary shopkeeper responding to the hunger in his neighbourhood with dignity. People, she laughingly added, did not know his name. He was either Pappu Bhai or Yusuf Bhai to everyone. She admitted it was a small matter, a neighbourhood reaching out to itself. She said, 'If Pappu Bhai's ethics of generosity could have been scaled up to one square mile, we have a community.' She claimed that Pappu Bhai was not a problem-solving or policy-making person, he had just created a caring economy. The langar, she added, was another vigorous and traditional example of open generosity. But the stories of the Pappu Bhai's will not be written about in newspapers. He won't be cited in CSR documents, but all democracy needs is a neighbourhood of Pappu Bhai's. He is not talking human rights, just living it.

Pappu Bhai becomes a metaphor for a different kind of thinking. Unfortunately, nobody listens to Pappu Bhai. Everyone watches Modi. She claimed that the second phase of the virus lashing out at Modi adds little. He is just a face in the mirror, the middle class echoing middle class emptiness. People on TV should now work on the one square mile ethics. It also challenges false news with ease. She was right. Critique in the time of virus demanded an ethical act. When the ethical act becomes political, policy in a democratic sense is born. One can scale up the planetary ethics after that. The simpleness of the ethical act my friend talked about went beyond voluntarism or philanthropy. It emphasized the face-to-face aspect of an eye-down relationship. The ethics is simple. Crisis demands that you rise above the average, crisis also demands that you rise above your own average. Third, you do both in a self-effacing way. Ethics as sacrifice, generosity, community, speaks louder than policy, turning a political economy into a model economy. One does not need a

handbook of management for it. It is there as a part of the wisdom of folklore. Parables often speak louder than mere policy.

Another friend of mine added that critique needs to be constructive. It has to connect to a community, share the spirit of storytelling, be plural and futuristic. It has set the path of alternative ways, which neither side possesses. It needs a moral imagination which is a prelude to problem solving. This friend claimed, as a well known social scientist, that public health of any crisis is an act of learning and an experiment in pedagogy. By locating oneself in a neighbourhood, the critic becomes witness, memory, testament, and trustee. He combines discourse and storytelling. Such ordinary literacy is important in an age where leadership displays both illiteracy and stereotype. To defeat a thoughtless thought, one needs thinking action. Maybe the last words belonged to a saddened policy expert. He said, 'We must stop pretending that policy is a perpetual motion machine of problem solving. We need the imagination and intelligence of neighbourhood and community to keep sensitive and human.'

Our sense of stereotype and normative begins with the state and then moves to science. It is interesting, we invoke science as a method, a technique as something readymade and available, something literally off the shelf. Science, like the Everest, is there. There is no sense of debate, plurality, doubt, scepticism. Science is the turnkey way of problem solving. The technocrat and the citizen merge in this invocation of a normative science. There is little sense of metaphysics or cosmology. Science is almost offered as a hygiene that purifies us in times of pollution. The presentations themselves are completely sanitized of history, and is offered as a form of immaculate innocence.

The absences and silences that surround the virus are enormous. In our urge to be modernist, it is as if we have lost the collective memory. India as a governmental regime has lost its sense of metaphor, then one realizes that it is a straightjacket of an imagination. One senses it in a housewife with a PhD saying, 'I wish I could tell the story of Tenaliraman and the virus, something to tell my child and reassure us both on the dangers of the virus.' There is an emptiness which the science cannot fill, but a spiritualized scientism, a packaged psychology, which promises a technique or a mantra but delivers neither. There is no sense of the fact that to be is to be afraid, and that we will have to create what Hans Jonas called, 'a heuristics of fear', a framework of the imagination. Half storytelling, half faith, which helps him cope. For too long now we have

denied coping or muddling through as unscientific or failed solutions.

In the infinity of postponed lockdowns, we now realize that coping is what we do anyway, even if we don't understand it. It is the body's innate wisdom, a sense of prudence. We have to bring back coping as a craft or fine art, a way of intuitively reacting to the crisis, by realizing that coping is not something your scientists can turn into a handbook. It is not a technique, just intuitive judgements within a cultural frame. Coping is a balancing act an individual performs within the limits and possibilities of a culture. As a housewife told me, 'Coping is a home science, both of everydayness and culture, because you sense the enormity of limits, you sense the interstices of possibility.' There is no magical spirituality to it. One loses the wisdom of coping in the age where psychology handbooks scout like cookbooks, offering custom made solutions. These are placebos, but one needs a deeper psychology of everydayness in a crisis, especially as one as prolonged as the virus.

As a friend told me, 'Coping is like cooking, we pick it up like tacit knowledge. Teaching it as management destroys it like a folktale. Coping and prayer allow me to make peace with my fears, and almost feel fond of my anxieties. Science cannot do that for me.' Another scholar told me, 'The sadness of science is its current isolation, science needs the company of the Shaman, the mystic, the trickster. Without myth, science would lose a sense of its own competence.' Disasters should train us to fight the poverty of dualisms. Dualisms impoverish the world around, confronting science with superstition, that not all beliefs outside science are superstitious. Lighting a lamp for your husband for his good life is not superstition. It steadies you, and it conveys more of what is called the Pascalian wager. Neils Bohr captured it when someone asked him why he had a blacksmith's hoof on the front door. He said it works fine, and in the meanwhile, it does not do bad. The world is full of Pascalian wagers that let us cope with uncertainty.

It is not just coping, it is public concern on the sense of what is happening. I was asked why is it that advertisements do not change the logic and rhythm of their usual rhetoric. Take Amul, it is acting as if it is still festival time celebrating itself. In days of shortage, can it not emphasize sharing, of doing with less. The failure of advertisement, of an imagination is startling. Probably the one exception was the Corona footwear ad, which racing through a world of footwear explains why safety demands we stay at home.

A different question asked by a lover of graphic novels was, ‘Would we have coped differently if India had a sense of science fiction?’ She was not referring to populist caricatures, but the classic stories of epidemics providing scenarios for the inexperienced, the unbelievable. The question was both literary and pedagogic. Could literature have added something to the way we responded? Could the sense of the knee-jerk be broadened into a sense of scenarios about alternative possibilities of lockdown? Can the virus not be seen as alien, intrusive, but as a part of a long *duree* of our imaginations?

Years ago, Johan Galtung and Robert Jungk had suggested that the future as an imagination be taught as an exercise to children. Science fiction could have been an interesting way of visualizing the Corona phenomena. One needs a different sense of the evil and the alien, even as metaphors for democracy to grow in our imagination. It could be a new meeting ground for science, fairytale, myth, and science fiction, creating a pluralism that transcends the ability of the scientific temper. There is little about the sociology of emotions. We work with concepts that neither have emotion, worse, we drive emotion into the backstage of the private and the domestic, and seek to scienticize it with canned spirituality. One desperately needs a sprinkling of ordinary conversations to add sense to the stiffness of policy initiatives.

To me the most stunning way this came home was in scraps of ethnography presented in blank verse. The housewife and the migrant become two classic characters that require a different reading.

Why ask a housewife / To play Kierkegaard / “on fear and trembling”? / His is a metaphysics, / Mine is a curdled everydayness. / “My fears are stark / I am scared / I am afraid / My anxieties overpower me”. / The Covid outside / Has created a Covid within. / This man’s world has no place / For anxiety, my anxiety / Men think in terms of / Pre-fabricated thoughts they call policy / Not tiny fears like little alphabets / Enzymes of anxiety / Signaling an unnamed distress / My fears speak for me / I am afraid / Therefore, I am – / A shopping list of worries / Using silence / To shame storytelling / And social science.

I am the housewife / Working in drudgery / Cooking, cleaning, washing / Repeatedly / My fear and trembling / Lost in waves of guilt / Dissolve in everydayness / My anxiety becomes inanity / I am hysteric and hypochondriac. / Yet no one senses my pain / The Covid has infected my mind / Mutating dreams into nightmares / Everydayness becomes an insanity / Of anxieties / Where hope becomes / The guilt of fear and waiting. /

I even discovered / That housework is no longer mine / It is what executive do at home / Between two cups of branded coffee / They wouldn’t know how to make. / While they are honored in newspaper supplements / Beaming as if they have patented / A sugarcoated drudgery / Home work is the new corporate worship / As executives / Play narcissists as housewife. / My anxiety needs an impressionist / Not a handbook of psychology / A sense of the skin deep / Frothing in a ferment / Of ifs and buts / Creating bleak futures / For everyone around me. / This Covid is a virus / For bringing alive / Empty time / Lost stories / Invisible people / From the untold cities of today / Covid reveals / Everyday worlds / We fail to recognize / Creatures of textbook sociology / Cloaked in invisibility. / The migrant, / There but not there / Servicing a city / As cook, tailor, builder, cleaner / A creature out of Mahashweta / Or Whitman / But lost to literature; / Documentaries don’t invisible everydayness / The language of facts lack poetry / The gossip of visibility / The voice of empathy / While my sadness is lost in silence. / I am the migrant / Liminal to the core / An insult to citizenship / Unwelcome at home / An alien at work. / I service cities / While cities cloak me in invisibility / When I emerge / I am an embarrassment / The refugee at home / Homeless everywhere / My borders begin with my body / I am hawker, the *rediwala* / As I am called / With fraudulent affection / Walking streets with a bare cart in front of me. / I am *chaiwala* / Subject of political humbug / Unemployed / Abandoned / No one speaks for me / While the P.M. / Hosts my caricature / In political rallies / As his homely double. / The city / A menagerie of the unwanted / Unemployed / Cook cleaner tailor / Barber and beautician; / Normalcy was my invisibility / I am the clockwork / That runs your city / While the city runs away from me / Every nook cranny crevice / Is my home / In a world without homecoming. / Don’t talk to me about policy / The ejaculation of economists / Flaunting their impotence / As exponential fears / In web in air seminars / The new salons of meaninglessness. / How does hypocrisy / Find an easy home / And we don’t? / We sit / Confined in sheds and abandoned schools / And bus stations / Sprayed with chemicals / Sanitized for a bus / To take us back / To what was once home.

Unfortunately, the poignancy of the situation does little to the making of policy. The idea of the new normal destroys storytelling again and creates a post truth society which requires a different analysis. But that needs a different story.

SHIV VISVANATHAN

Call for a new social contract between science and society

WIEBE E. BIJKER

THE Covid-19 pandemic presents a wake-up call to rethink the relationship between science and society. We need to formulate a new social contract between science and society. Different countries may emphasize different aspects in such a new social contract, but I will argue that Covid-19 has demonstrated the urgency for all countries to reconsider the role of science. My plea will be based, mostly, on experiences in The Netherlands, but I will also draw on my work in India.

The old social contract for science, which characterized the science-society relationship from the 19th century to the 1960s, can be traced back to the Humboldtian ideal of university education and to the vision of science spurring innovation by Vannevar Bush, US presidential adviser. The Humboldtian model of higher education, named after the Prussian philosopher and diplomat Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), dates from the early 19th century. It is mostly known for stressing the unity of research and teaching: both can and should be done within one institution, the university.

For my argument, another element is important: that these scientist teachers have a high degree of autonomy. Vannevar Bush, in his 1945 report *Science, The Endless Frontier*, also stresses the autonomy of science.¹ He presents a linear model: fundamental research – applied

research – technological development – innovation. The Bush version of the social contract, then, states that if society funds basic science, science will in return deliver innovations and wealth to society.

Central elements in the old social contract for science thus are the autonomy of science and the state funding for science. Science is expected to deliver a steady stream of innovations, but there is no detailed accounting of those results. Additional elements are implied, for example about the choice of research topics: the research agenda is decided by scientists and without state interference. Quality control of science is done internally within science by peer-review. And most scientific research is done in universities and is mono-disciplinary. This style of doing science has also been labelled ‘mode-1 science’.²

This social contract of an autonomous science that is delivering public goods to society has been crumbling since the 1960s. The autonomy of science has eroded since budget constraints and international competition prompted governments to set national research priorities and to make research funding conditional on delivering specific results. Moreover, much more research came to be done outside universities, in semi-public and private institutions and big corpo-

1. Vannevar Bush, *Science, the Endless Frontier. A Report to the President*. U.S. Office of Scientific Research and Development, Washington, 1945.

2. Helga Nowotny, Scott Peter and Gibbons Michael, *Re-thinking Science: Knowledge and the Public in an Age of Uncertainty*. Polity Press in association with Blackwell, Cambridge, 2001.

rate industries. Scientific research now is often multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary.

Nowotny et al.³ have characterized this as a shift to ‘mode-2 science’. However, previous decades have not only seen a crumbling of the old contract. New arrangements and practices have emerged that relate science and society to each other in novel and promising ways. These new arrangements, to which I shall return below, already could be seen as elements for a new social contract between science and society. But perhaps the Covid-19 pandemic was needed to give the last push.

When I now discuss the role of science during the Covid-19 pandemic, I am painfully aware that it provides only a limited view on what happened during the Corona crisis. Much of the initial scientific discussion and advice was about the degree of isolation that a government should declare – to what degree should society be ‘locked-down’? The experiences of many countries, including India, does however show that isolation is a ‘rich man’s option’ – for the poor, a lockdown makes survival very difficult when the state does not provide for alternative financial security. And in countries with extreme divides between rich and poor, that is typically out of the question. But even in such countries, policies could have benefited from more scientific advice, albeit from the social sciences rather than only virology.

After a brief period of light-heartedly considering the corona virus as just another influenza, the seriousness of the Covid-19 pandemic hit The Netherlands. Almost immediately, science took a more prominent role – some said, critically, that science took

the driver’s seat. An ‘Outbreak Management Team’ (OMT) was convened by the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM).⁴ This OMT quickly became the key adviser to the government on its policies with regard to this pandemic. The OMT is a standing RIVM committee of scientists. It consists of infectiologists, microbiologists and epidemiologists, and some experts on public health and primary health care.

The OMT has some ten permanent members and an additional list of experts, depending on the specific outbreak that is to be managed. Virologists initially dominated the Covid-19 OMT, but after the first two months social and behavioural scientists were also added. The Director of the RIVM Centre for Infectious Disease Control, also professor of internal medicine and infectious diseases, is chairman and spokesperson of the OMT.

Soon, The Netherlands settled on a weekly routine. On Monday, the OMT convened and formulated its scientific advice. The following day, an interdepartmental group of high-level civil servants processed this OMT advice. Tuesday afternoon, a special Covid-19 ministerial council, consisting of the prime minister and a few key ministers, discussed the OMT advice and commentaries by the civil servants and decided on new policy measures. That same evening, broadcast live by national TV, the prime minister presented these policies at a press conference. Significantly, these press conferences almost always had two presenters: the prime minister and the OMT chair. On Wednesday, the OMT chair would give a ‘technical briefing’ to parliament, also broadcast live on national TV.

4. For the OMT within the RIVM, see: <https://www.rivm.nl/en/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/omt>

A few observations will serve to explicate the new position that science acquired overnight after the Covid-19 outbreak. First, on the choreography of the public meetings: the OMT chair stood next to the prime minister during every press meeting; and this scientist-professor lectured members of parliament, who all tried to behave as good students. Second, on the content of the scientific discourse, two elements stood out. The scientific content was taken seriously – no scientific-technical details were avoided but time was spent on explicating key concepts, going through graphs in detail, and citing international literature. The other striking element was that the uncertainty of much of the data, and lack of knowledge about this particular virus, was stressed rather than hidden.

Third, on transparency – all documents were placed on the website of Parliament and RIVM, all parliamentary hearings and debates were broadcast live and followed by an unusually high number of viewers (helped, no doubt, by the partial lockdown), and datasets and scientific literature that formed the basis of the OMT advice were all cited in detail.

Fourth, on politics-science relations. Briefly, it seemed that science had taken over the driver’s seat. The prime minister so often repeated that the government was following the OMT advice that some of us started to have bad dreams of an emerging technocracy. The OMT chair himself deserves much credit for this bad dream not becoming a reality. He consistently refused to make policy statements and always underlined the limited scope of the OMT’s scientific perspective. Paradoxically, this underlining of the limitations of science resulted in its gaining respect and credibility. One incident, about the closing of schools, also helped to underline the balance between politics and science to which I will return later.

3. Ibid.

Fifth, on the public appreciation of science. Half a year earlier, in a completely unrelated controversy about CO₂ and NO₂ emissions, the same RIVM had come under severe attack. Farmers held rallies with hundreds of tractors in front of the RIVM building, questioning the scientific basis for restrictive measures to limit emissions. Some government ministers and members of parliament responded by being critical about the scientific quality of the RIVM advice.

At that moment, in mid-2019, several examples could illustrate the decreasing acceptance of scientific advice by the general public: about the source of CO₂ and NO₂ emissions, about the need for vaccination, about the lack of risk of electromagnetic radiation from G4 and G5 masts, about the need for climate change policies, among others.⁵ Against this background, the almost unquestioned support for the RIVM advice about the Covid-19 pandemic was remarkable. Only a few populist, right wing politicians questioned the RIVM advice, but they were ignored and soon shut up, temporarily.

Thus was the new role of science: prominent, substantive, transparent, restricted to advising, and broadly accepted. But soon some cracks in this rosy picture appeared. Some were internal to the scientific community. There was some debate about the degree of societal lockdown, and in the wake of that debate some virologists criticized the OMT for not being open enough about its internal discussions: ‘we in science

5. It is worth noting that a study by the Rathenau Institute (the Dutch Institute for Technology Assessment) and the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) has shown that Dutch citizens still trust scientists – at least much more so than that they trust politicians and journalists. (Will Tiemeijer and Jos de Jonge, *Hoeveel Vertrouwen Hebben Nederlanders in Wetenschap?* Rathenau Institute, Den Haag, 2013.)

are always open and critical in our discussions – the OMT is not behaving scientifically’. This highlights an important difference between scientific research and scientific advice, and especially in the making of both. As we have learned from the practice of the Health Council, one of the most respected advisory bodies in The Netherlands, the making of scientific advice is a skill in itself, rooted in but different from general scientific skills.⁶

One important element in the making of scientific advice is that the committee’s deliberations are completely confidential, in order to allow for an open and safe discussion of alternative readings and interpretations. The advisory process is transparent in how the committee members are selected and what their institutional links and interests are, but not in making public the internal committee’s discussions. The OMT responded to this critique by continuing to cite all the scientific literature behind the advice, but stressed that there was no certainty.

A second and more serious crack was about the closing of schools. On March 10, the OMT advised to *not* close down primary and secondary schools, arguing that children with symptoms are required to stay at home anyway, and that children are less affected by the virus and less likely to spread it too. In the next four days, opposition against this policy increased among teachers and parents. On Sunday morning, the special ministerial council decided that the schools would be closed.

Important for my argument is that the prime minister still cited the OMT advice (of keeping the schools open) but admitted that sometimes one has to make another choice. One representa-

6. Wiebe E. Bijker, Roland Bal, and Ruud Hendriks, *The Paradox of Scientific Authority: The Role of Scientific Advice in Democracies*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2009.

tive of the school boards commented: ‘rational arguments became weaker, emotional arguments stronger’, and ‘we cannot do the impossible; if the situation cannot be contained, everything becomes different.’ This was a crack in following the scientific advice, but it was, significantly, not a crack in the new balance between science and politics: the scientific advice was still positively cited, but at the same time political leaders took their own responsibility and decided differently.

The third crack in the rosy picture was the role of parliament. Because of national lockdown measures, parliament did not convene in plenary session. Also, the prime minister, in his duet with the OMT chair, acquired almost presidential stature – a very non-Dutch figure. For a while, parliamentary control became difficult and almost invisible. This raises an important question about a new social contract between science and society. What role can parliament play as a third party in the triangle of Government-Science-Parliament?⁷

This brief sketch of the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the relationship between science and politics in The Netherlands provides elements for rethinking the social contract between science and society. However, over the past two decades, some other changes in the relationship between science and society are worth taking into account as well. After all, it is not my argument that the Covid-19 crisis is causing a complete change in the

7. To begin with, every parliament should be served by an independent ‘Technology Assessment’ office. See Wiebe E. Bijker, ‘Technology Assessment – the State of/at Play. Towards a Hybrid and Pluriform Process of Governance of Science and Technology’, in Tomas Michalek, Lenka Hebakova, Leonhard Hennen, Constanze Scherz, Linda Nierling and Julia Hahn (eds.), *Technology Assessment and Policy Area of Great Transitions*. Technology Centre ASCR, Prague, 2014, pp. 23-36.

social contract; I argue that the Covid-19 pandemic provides a wake-up call to continue with a revision of the social contract between science and society that was already in the making.

One aspect of the current research policy that clearly differs from the classic Humboldt-Bush social contract is that countries now quite explicitly formulate societal challenges which their research must help address, and then organize their research accordingly. The European Union's Framework Programmes have had that character from the very beginning in 1984. And non-state groups have raised these questions too. In 2009, for example, Indian and African activists and researchers asked what kind of research India and Africa would need for their own development; what research agenda to set on Indian and African terms, rather than await global (i.e. mostly 'western') science to supposedly benefit India and Africa? This resulted in two manifestos for Indian and African science.⁸

In the previous cases, policy makers and activist-experts set the research agenda. The Dutch National Research Agenda (NWA) is a recent example from The Netherlands, where all citizens were invited to engage with science's research agenda. This process started in 2015: everyone in the Netherlands was invited to submit questions to science, questions that needed to be researched. Citizens, stakeholders, scientists, NGOs, ministries, municipalities, universities, unions and businesses asked more than 11,000 questions. These were then filtered and validated by the Royal

Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW).

Some questions were filtered out – for example because they could already be answered by existing knowledge. Others were considered impossible to research scientifically. This filtering of questions was done anonymously: the KNAW committees did not know whether a question was asked by a Nobel laureate or by a school kid. The remaining questions were grouped in some 250 overarching clusters. These clusters were then discussed in three conferences – 'Science 4 Science', 'Science 4 Competitiveness', and 'Science 4 Society' – amongst citizens, stakeholders and scientists.

The outcomes of the conferences were processed into 25 routes. A route does two things: it offers a path for research through a subset of the 250 question clusters, and it suggests a path for society towards addressing an important societal challenge. In December 2015, these routes, clusters and underlying questions were presented in an interactive on-line National Research Agenda. In 2016, the routes were elaborated and used as building blocks for a Science Investment Agenda for the Dutch government. The government adopted the agenda in 2017 and allocated 100 MEuros per year for NWA research.⁹ Since 2018, annual calls for proposals invite researchers to apply with their research plans. To bring out the special character of this socially generated NWA, projects are required to be interdisciplinary, involve stakeholders and citizens in their execution, and pro-actively plan the societal uptake of their research findings.

If the previous examples suggest that citizens are only capable of sending wish lists without any interest in the

possibilities and constraints of scientific research, the following example shows otherwise. In the first decade of this century, the Dutch government saw the dilemma between the high promises of nanotechnologies (such as precision drug delivery mechanisms) and high risks (such as nanotoxicity) and decided to organize a societal dialogue about the future development of nanotechnologies. This public dialogue resulted in the Dutch citizenry stating that nanotechnologies should be developed further, but with more research devoted to its risks.

During the dialogue, citizens could educate themselves through a broad range of projects and programmes, and then express their informed opinion. This set-up worked well. Parallel to the process of the dialogue, a representative sample of the Dutch population was surveyed. Awareness as 'having heard of nanotechnologies' increased during the societal dialogue from 54% to 64% of the Dutch population, and 'knowing the meaning of nanotechnology' increased from 30% to 36%.¹⁰

Yet another example of involving society in science – and thus offering a change in the old social contract between science and society – is Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI). Four dimensions summarize the thrust of RRI: it requires *anticipation* of the future societies that we wish, *reflexivity* by researchers and innovators on the effects of their work, *inclusion* of relevant stakeholders, and *responsiveness* to the needs and ambitions of society as well as to the intermediate research results.¹¹ One

8. SET-DEV and ATPS, *The African Manifesto for Science, Technology and Innovation*. ATPS, Nairobi and Brussels, 2011; SET-DEV, *Knowledge Swaraj: An Indian Manifesto on Science and Technology*. University of Hyderabad & Knowledge in Civil Society Forum, Hyderabad, 2011.

9. See <https://www.nwo.nl/en/research-and-results/programmes/dutch-national-research+agenda>

10. See <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/The-public-and-issues-of-science/article15444273.ece>

11. See also the websites of some EU-funded projects, for example: <https://starbios2.eu> and <https://fit4rri.eu>

implication of RRI – and of three decades of work in STS (Science, Technology & Society studies) – is that knowledge provided by non-scientists (in the sense of not being trained in universities) is also valued.

Thus taking other knowledge systems seriously is in line with Shiv Visvanathan's plea for cognitive justice: 'cognitive justice is the right of every individual or group to pursue and perpetuate the forms of knowledge that their ways of life depend upon.'¹² Visvanathan grounds cognitive justice in India's struggle for independence and adds: 'In a negative sense, it seeks to protect the group from modern western science or any other form of knowledge that seeks to hegemonize, eliminate or museumize it. It is a concept which seeks both the survival of communities and to protect the logic of their creativity.'

An example is the work by Annapurna Mamidipudi about innovation in handloom communities.¹³ She demonstrates how sophisticated the knowledge and technologies of handloom weavers are. Instead of treating handloom as cultural heritage to be museumized or as a backward technology to be mechanized, she shows the innovation that is happening – without being called 'innovation', a term mostly associated in India with IT and biotechnology. And to underscore Visvanathan's suggestion that cognitive justice is particularly important to protect vulnerable and marginal groups in society, Mamidipudi recently

demonstrated how this knowledge of handloom weavers, embedded in a flexible and home-based craft industry, offers a much more sustainable livelihood in times of the Covid-19 pandemic than many standard mass industries.¹⁴

Another example of soliciting knowledge from non-scientists is offered by an RRI project that investigated alternatives to burning rice straw. The burning of rice straw in the north of India has become a massive problem – not only social, but also political and environmental. In the months of October and November, when harvesting of rice takes place, the national as well as international media are full of critical reports about the issue. These reports often criminalize farmers and blame authorities for inaction. Along with various versions of the problem, newspapers also report multiple innovative solutions. These include the production of straw-based bioenergy, which is thought to simply remedy the situation.

Even though each year the discussion around this issue is enormous, the tension around straw burning quickly declines after the harvesting season when the smoke dissipates – only to return again the next year. Together with scientists, industrialists, policy makers and farmers, we investigated the possibility to produce biogas from rice straw as an alternative to burning the straw on the fields. Details about this project and its findings have been published in a special issue of *Science, Technology and Society*.¹⁵

Here, I want to highlight the role that farmers came to play.

We set out to investigate how farmers could deliver the straw to the biogas plants, and benefit from the electricity produced by those plants. However, by listening to these farmers, we were pushed to radically rethink the definition of the problem. For most farmers the burning of straw was not the problem, it was a solution. Since the Green Revolution, farmers in Punjab have been charged with the responsibility of 'feeding the nation' and pushed into growing four crops a year. After harvesting the rice, they have only three weeks to clear their fields and prepare for sowing wheat. Most farmers do not see any other solution but burning the straw. For them biogas is not a solution, only an extra burden: collecting the straw from the fields, storing it, and transporting it to a biogas plant just costs too much labour, money and time. And additionally, Punjab villages typically have enough electricity anyway.

We also met with farmers who label themselves 'organic': for these organic farmers, biogas is part of the solution, but a solution to a very different problem. Their problem is not primarily the smoke: 'we know that the smoke is hazardous, but pollution is also caused by the traffic in New Delhi, so why blame us?' Their problem is that burning the straw destroys important nutrients, which they would like to give back to the soil. However, it is problematic to plough rice straw directly back into the soil. It needs composting or mulching, and feeding it into a biogas plant would help: in addition to biogas, such a plant produces waste that can be used as organic fertilizer.

We wanted to bring these views into the debate about managing the rice straw burning. But in regular policy conferences and university work-

12. Shiv Visvanathan, 'The Search for Cognitive Justice.' Karl Jaspers Centre, Heidelberg, 2011.

13. Annapurna Mamidipudi, 'Towards a Theory of Innovation for Handloom Weaving in India.' PhD, MUSTS, Maastricht University, 2016; Annapurna Mamidipudi and Wiebe E. Bijker, 'Innovation in Indian Handloom Weaving', *Technology & Culture* 59, 2018, pp. 509-545.

14. Annapurna Mamidipudi, 'Indian Weaving in the Time of COVID-19', *Penelope*, 23 April 2020. <https://penelope.hypotheses.org/2100>.

15. Poonam Pandey, Govert Valkenburg, Annapurna Mamidipudi and Wiebe Bijker, 'Responsible Research and Innovation in the Global South: Agriculture, Renewable Energy and the Pursuit of Symmetry (special issue)', *Science, Technology & Society* 25(2), 2020, pp. 215-356.

shops, farmers do not feel comfortable to talk about their practices and insights. For a free flow of ideas and discussion, farmers must outnumber others, and the medium of communication has to be a local language that could be translated into English in hushed tones without interrupting the flow of the discussion. Utmost care had to be taken to not individualize those who burn the straw in order to enable them to speak openly about their vulnerabilities and challenges. These considerations resulted in our organizing a farmers' dialogue meeting where more than 100 farmers gathered for a whole day of discussion.

The event took place in an organic farmer's field, which we chose to demonstrate the potential of this farming method in engaging with the problem of straw burning. The food served during the event was organically produced in the same farm and locally prepared. This intervention to give more voice to a relatively powerless perspective resulted in the farmers – both regular and organic – to feel validated in their expertise and knowledge and they subsequently accepted invitations to the workshops with scientists, policy makers and industrialists. Their views were published alongside the other, more 'standard', scientific texts.¹⁶

We need a new social contract between science and society – the Covid-19 pandemic is demonstrating how *necessary* this is. The pandemic has clearly revealed the crucial role of science and technology in our societies – without globalization and its transportation technologies, the Corona virus would not have travelled so far and fast, and without virology, epidemio-

logy and social sciences, the devastation would have been even larger.

The pandemic has also shown that a new contract between science and society is *possible*. The pandemic demonstrated the benefits of a relatively new role for science: prominent, substantive, transparent, restricted to advising, and broadly accepted. Science assumed a relatively *prominent* role in shaping public health policies to contain the pandemic. Hereby, scientists did not hesitate to present *substantive* content – explaining technical concepts and highlighting the uncertainty of much of the data and lack of knowledge about this particular virus. The making of scientific advice was *transparent* – publishing the background of scientists on the advisory committees, and citing relevant scientific literature. Both in the technical briefings to parliament and in the scientific advice to government, scientists maintained their limited *advisory role* and refused to be pushed into a policy making role.

And Dutch citizens *generally accepted* this role of science, recognizing its crucial insights to address the challenge of a pandemic in our complex societies. Pre-Covid-19 elements, I have argued, can be added to this new social contract: society setting a research agenda for science to address major challenges, responsible innovation, and cognitive justice.

This new social contract is not easy and without tensions. The element of 'society setting a research agenda' should not be read, for example, as making a plea for stopping all fundamental research. Such fundamental research is only guided by scientists' curiosity – but this type of scientific research has produced many of the current insights and innovations that our societies thrive on. Some mix of society-driven and science-driven

research, possibly different for each country, is advisable. The element 'incorporating cognitive justice' – and thus also taking seriously, for example, farmers' and crafts people's knowledge systems – inevitably creates tensions with the element 'prominent role of science' if the latter is read as standard university science.

There is no easy solution. Researchers, activists, citizens: all need to strike a balance between confidence in one's own expertise and modesty when listening to others who speak from another knowledge system. Elsewhere, I have concluded that we need to cherish a style of 'bold modesty'.¹⁷

This new social contract is not only difficult to implement, neither is it a panacea for all problems we face. For the new social contract to function, societies should have basic democratic characteristics such as a free and knowledgeable press, truly independent academic institutions, and respect for minorities. The Covid-19 pandemic showed that many populist, if not undemocratic, leaders ignored scientific advice and thus catapulted their countries to the top of the pandemic death scores.

The alternative, however, is true too: implementing the new social contract between science and society will strengthen democratic elements such as strong universities, independent scientific advice, responsible innovation, listening to citizens' identification of societal challenges, and recognition of minority knowledge systems. The Covid-19 pandemic thus presents a wake-up call to rethink the relationship between science and society and thereby strengthen our democracies.

16. Bharat Bhushan Tyagi and Richi Kumar, 'The Future of Farming: To What End and For What Purpose?' *Science, Technology & Society* 25(2), 2020, pp. 256-272.

17. Wiebe E. Bijker, 'Constructing Worlds: Reflections on Science, Technology and Democracy (and a Plea for Bold Modesty)', *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society* 3(315-331), 2017. doi: 10.17351/ests2017.170.

Metaphors in progress

BOAVENTURA DE SOUSA SANTOS

THE new coronavirus has given rise to an abundance of metaphors, all of them involving a major move away from the contexts in which such metaphors are commonly used. This, in itself, tells us a lot about the shock and astonishment generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The metaphors are but an attempt to tame the virus *qua* phenomenon. It is not an easy task, given that we are not even sure whether the virus is a natural or a social phenomenon.

Metaphors are a call to reality, an attempt to frame the virus in terms that we are able to grasp at the social, philosophical and cultural level. Far from being arbitrary, metaphors are intentional. They point to different types of action and conjure up different post-pandemic societies. I distinguish three

metaphors: the virus as enemy, the virus as messenger, and the virus as pedagogue.

The virus as enemy is the favorite metaphor of governments. War falls, as it always will, within the exclusive competence of the state. Among all the tasks performed by the state, it is the one around which the broadest consensus can be found. The enemy metaphor is a double metaphor, in that it conceives of the fight against the virus as a war, and of the virus as the enemy to be beaten. The war metaphor is effective in its conveying of the gravity of the threat and the patriotic need for unity in the fight against that threat. This call for unity is especially useful in states recently hit by widespread social protests, as is the case with France (and the *gilets jaunes*

demonstrations). War presupposes the use of extreme combat measures. It promotes a simplistic political narrative, of the 'you're either with us or against us' type. An enemy is not to be persuaded or argued against, but to be eliminated.

The enemy metaphor suffers from two main biases. On the one hand, it looks at anti-pandemic measures as coming exclusively from the state. But the fight against the pandemic also enlists the staunch participation of families, communities, associations and, first and foremost, the health care providers, whose sense of mission is not restricted by their obligations as civil servants. On the other hand, this metaphor suggests that, once the war is won, everything will go back to normal.

Now, in all likelihood that will not be the case, not only because final victory sounds like a very uncertain outcome, but also because, were such victory ever to happen, the new normal will be quite different from what it used to be. Most of all, it is highly likely that the virus will not be eliminated, but rather tamed or neutralized by vaccines and the antibodies we'll end up producing. In the end, maybe the war will never be won, and the best outcome we can hope for is a temporary, conditional truce.

Over the past fifty years, the war metaphor has been widely used in the western world – with the U.S. at its head – to denote the perception of the gravity of the perils threatening to destroy it. If history serves as a lesson, those were designed as permanent or even perpetual wars. Such has been the case with the war against communism, even though communism no longer exists in the world, not even in China, where state capitalism is now the law of the land. The same applies to the war on terrorism, the war on

drugs and, in more recent times, the war on corruption. None of these wars has come to an end yet, nor are they expected to do so in the near future.

Will it be the same with the war against the pandemic? Interestingly enough, the war against recent pandemics (HIV-AIDS or Ebola) shares with other permanent wars the fact that it is an irregular war. The enemy is elusive and deceptive. It has no regard for the laws of war, eschews conventional tactics, and will not be effectively opposed unless the fight against it is waged with identical means. Is the war against the Covid-19 pandemic a new war, to be added to the list of permanent or eternal wars? We do know that the war will not end until vaccines are made widely available. Until that happens, we will go through a period of what I describe as intermittent pandemic. Even with a vaccine, however, and unless our current model of development, consumption and civilization is altered, other pandemics are highly likely to strike. Therefore, we may well be facing another permanent war.

Such a possibility should be cause for concern, and not just because it means the recurrence of ever more frequent and more lethal viruses. In fact, the abovementioned permanent wars have served those who declare them in achieving ends that have nothing to do with the ends they declared. Those wars have served, before anything else, to neutralize political opponents and exert control over areas of geostrategic influence. Will the war against the virus lend itself to such a use? Some disturbing signs can be discerned. Viewed against the backdrop of the world's major powers (USA, China and the European Union), the war against the pandemic is part of the war for geostrategic hegemony waged between China and the USA.

Aside from everything else, the war metaphor has a negative impact on the democratic life of a society engaged in the fight against the virus. Wartimes are exceptional times, when orders are to be obeyed, not debated. There is no room for reasoning or for coming up with alternatives. After all, unconditional obedience is supposed to be for our own good, and if we do not obey, we put our lives, not to mention the lives of others, at risk. The war places an overwhelming pressure on citizenship. This pressure will not be fatal as long as it is short-lived. But what if it isn't?

In short, the war and enemy metaphor does not help us imagine a better society, *i.e.*, one that is more diverse with regard to intercultural experiences, more democratic, more equal, more just, and less exposed to lethal viruses like the present one. This metaphor expresses a death drive directed against the death threat posed by the virus. It pits death against death, telling us nothing about the possibility and desirability of a no-war scenario. Given all the above, it does not strike me as very useful. Things could be different if the war and enemy metaphor were to be deconstructed so as to let us see and understand the enemies in this war. After all, it stands to reason that if the virus is the enemy of society, then maybe society is the enemy of the virus.

It would therefore be wise to follow the example of war photographer Karim Ben Khelifa, as presented in his remarkable documentary *The Enemy*.¹ After 15 years as a war photographer, he began to question the usefulness of his photos, since they totally failed to change people's attitudes toward the war and make them desire peace. He came to the conclu-

1. Available at <http://theenemyishere.org/>, consulted on 25 April 2020.

sion that one of the reasons was perhaps the fact that enemies remained invisible. So he decided to make the combatants visible, by giving them a voice and allowing them to introduce themselves and explain their motives, dreams and fears. By resorting to advanced communication technologies, he allowed the point of view of enemies to confront the point of view of those fighting on the opposite side. With that, enemies ceased to be enemies.

Would we be able to do the same in the case of the war against the virus? How can one make nano-entities visible? How can we begin to know their reasons for attacking us and their points of view about the society in which we live? And were that possible, what reasons would we provide for trying to eliminate or at least neutralize them? Would it be possible to compare motives and points of view, and even be talked into substantially altering our ways of life? Would it then be possible to establish, not just a truce, but true coexistence based on more civilized behaviour from both sides? Despite Karim Ben Khelifa's remarkable endeavour, the sad fact is that war is war, and it is all about killing and getting killed.

The second metaphor conceives of the virus as a messenger – a messenger from nature, for sure. According to this metaphor, the specific content or details of the message are irrelevant, for the message resides in the virus's very presence. It is a performative message. It is also a horrible message, because it spells death or the threat of death. This message leaves us with the question of what to do with the messenger. In eastern tradition, and in China in particular, there used to be an unspoken agreement whereby a messenger sent by any of the warring parties would travel unarmed and

at no personal risk. In western tradition, on the other hand, there is a long, recurring history, going all the way back to ancient Egypt and Greece, of messengers getting killed for being the bearers of bad news. Because of that recurrence, the phrase 'kill the messenger' has become a cultural *topos* and a form of political tactics.

In his *Lives*, Plutarchus tells the story of Tigranes, who, upset by the news that Lucullus was about to arrive, murdered the messenger to mitigate his own distress. In Shakespeare's play *Antony and Cleopatra*, the latter threatens to gouge out the eyes of the messenger who brings her the news that Antony had married Octavius Caesar's sister, Octavia. The 'kill the messenger' topos is still very much present today. Suffice it to consider the way Julian Assange has been treated (slowly murdered is perhaps how we ought to put it) for bringing so many bad messages to the powerful of the world.

'Kill the messenger' is the operative cultural archetype in the case of the virus-as-messenger metaphor. Granted, a small number of those who resort to this metaphor favour it over the enemy metaphor precisely because they are intent on understanding the message, no matter how painful it may be. However, in the context of public discourse, even when the virus-as-messenger metaphor is used, not a single minute is spent in the attempt to decode it. The panic or terror over the performative message (death or death threat) is such that no attempt is made to investigate the cause of death, as would be the case with any criminal investigation or detective novel. All follow-up action is a *non sequitur* with regard to the meaning of the message. As far as society is concerned, it is enough to dislike the news brought by the virus. It does not attempt to

confront it, much less face the probable reasons behind it. Instead, it concentrates every effort on killing the messenger.

For this reason, the virus-as-messenger metaphor does not strike me as helpful in terms of allowing us to prevent the future occurrence of new messengers, possibly carrying even more terrifying news. Like the enemy metaphor, the messenger metaphor focuses on eliminating this virus. It can prove useful to defend us in the present, but not to defend us in the future.

My personal preference goes to the virus-as-pedagogue metaphor, the only one that requires us to try to understand the virus and the underlying motives for its behaviour and, as a result, to try and organize social responses aimed at reducing the probability of being intruded upon in such an unwelcome way by future viruses. To conceive of the virus as a pedagogue is to confer upon it a dignity far superior to that bestowed by the preceding metaphors. For the war metaphor, the virus is an enemy to be beaten; and as to the messenger metaphor, it views the virus as a carrier with no significant role in the rivalries at play. As a carrier, it will certainly only tell us what the messenger told Cleopatra in Shakespeare's play: 'Gracious madam, / I that do bring the news made not the match.'

The pedagogue metaphor is the only one that makes us interact with the virus, as it turns it into a subject worthy of holding a dialogue with us. It is certainly a cruel pedagogue, who does not waste time explaining the reasons for its behaviour and simply acts as it is supposed to act. But it is not an irrational being. It had its own reasons for coming to us at this point and in the way it did. Therefore, we must try to think about it so that we will gradually be able to think with it, until we can finally start thinking from its point of view.

Thus, I propose a diatopic hermeneutics of a new kind, poised between human rationality and viral rationality, an interpretation of the world located between two different conceptions of life and of the relations between society and nature, in the hope of reaching, through mutual concessions or transformations, points of convergence leading to a coexistence between humans and non-humans. The hermeneutics in question is aimed at learning from the virus and transferring what we learn from it onto society. Thus viewed, it amounts to an intervital pedagogy, halfway between human and non-human life.

It will not be an easy pedagogy to embrace. Difficulties abound at many levels. Is it possible to learn from someone we have never seen or will ever see? Learning from the virus will always mean tele-, or remote, learning. How is that different from the revelations of divinity to be found in many religions? Besides, is society open to learning? I actually think that most people see the virus as a nightmare from which they want to awake as fast as possible. In that case, the drive to forget will be stronger than the drive to learn. On the other hand, if we agree, as I have been arguing, that we must learn from the virus,² the learning process will run into huge obstacles.

The best pedagogical theories teach us that all learning must be co-learning, *i.e.*, reciprocal learning aimed at mutual education. Even if we are open to learning from the virus, how can we know whether the virus wants to learn from us? Suppose we apply Paulo Freire's theory – the justly celebrated pedagogy of the oppressed – to such learning. In this situation, who is the oppressed – we or the virus?

2. *A Cruel Pedagogia do Vírus* ('The Cruel Pedagogy of the Virus'). Almedina, Coimbra, 2020; Boitempo, São Paulo, 2020.

All these difficulties notwithstanding, I believe that the virus-as-pedagogue metaphor presents us with a task at once viable and urgent. We must start by engaging in deep listening with the virus. Dominant western knowledge has never taught us how to listen deeply to anything.³ It has only taught us how to hear, but hearing is the poorest and most superficial form of listening. To hear is to allow oneself to understand only that which we deem relevant, whether pleasant or unpleasant. It is problematic, because it is subject to our interests of the moment. In fact, since we are the dominant part in the act of listening, we only hear and value what interests us.

When conducting interviews, all a sociologist or a journalist does is hear. If the interviewee starts to talk about what truly interests or upsets her, she will only be heard if it coincides with the interviewer's own interests. Everything else is irrelevant, no matter how vital it may be for the interviewee.

How does one effect a deep listening of the virus? First of all, we must consider that the virus may well be saying things that only sound unintelligible because we cannot, or will not, understand them. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that the virus is a natural being; the difficulties involved in deep listening are particularly debilitating in the context of Eurocentric culture. The way in which Eurocentric human beings have been formatted by it has rendered them unable to listen to nature and willing to observe the latter only when it gives them pleasure (landscape contemplation) or when they derive some sort of advantage from it (appropriation of natural resources, raw materials). Deep listening entails

3. As I have argued in *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*. Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2018, pp. 165-183.

a much greater effort: daring to decipher and to comprehend.

But how are we to communicate with the virus? In what tongue or language? With its infecting and killing, the virus seems to excel in factual language. To engage in argument with it, aiming at an outwardly similar language, will result in neutralizing or killing it. But in that case there will be nothing to learn, and we will end up in the realm of the war and enemy metaphor. In order to learn from the virus, we need to take a step further. We must not limit ourselves to what it tells us, but rather try to find out what it wishes to tell us and why.

Having reached this point, we need to be able to build a translation bridge or platform between human and viral language. This has nothing to do with mere linguistic translation. I am talking about intercultural translation, to be carried out between the human culture of the infected and the dead, the culture of the health care providers who tend to them, the scientific culture of those studying viruses, and the natural culture of the infectious, lethal agent. It is a highly complex task, made worse by that fatal vice to which humans are so prone: anthropocentrism.

The vice consists in conceiving of the world in our own image, and thus projecting motives onto the virus as if it were one of us. The problem is that, if we do that, we will learn but what we already know, which is nothing. It is therefore imperative to start from the assumption that the virus does not think like us, but rather like a virus. And although it terrifies us, we must comfort ourselves with the idea that, in this respect, we are superior to it. The virus is incapable of imagining that it is possible to think differently than the way it thinks.

How is intervital translation possible, given the unbridgeable gap

between our language and that of the virus? We might even imagine that we and the virus live in separate universes. Such a hypothesis is likely to please the proponents of the notion of a pluriverse – *i.e.*, the notion that, even among humans, differences sometimes can be of such magnitude that they are simply beyond compare, for they belong to different universes. The problem with this notion is that it makes it impossible to even start to compare the differences, for they belong to universes that are incommensurable. If comparing is impossible, then learning is even less possible. But is it acceptable to see as belonging to a distinct universe a being that is so close to – if not already inside – us, and which poses such an existential threat to us that it leads us to paralysis and forces us to retreat to the innermost caves of our intimacy, where we still fail to feel one hundred percent safe?

The notion of co-presence can be more productive than that of a pluriverse. As unfathomable as the virus may be, its presence in our midst is frighteningly unequivocal. We are, therefore, co-present, and that is the basis upon which communication should be established. In addition to the difficulties inherent in intervital translation, a semiotic code needs to be developed in order to invest co-presence with meaning. Such a code can only be signal-based communication. We have already seen that infection and potential death are the signs of the virus. The whys and wherefores of the signs will only remain opaque as long as the virus is viewed, as I did above, as a natural entity. But is that really the case? What if it is more human than we think?

I am not referring to the conspiracy theories that claim the virus was created in a laboratory. I am talking about something far more substantive and with far greater consequences.

I am talking about the fact that the virus is a co-creation of humans and nature, a co-creation that is a product of the way in which men have interfered with natural processes, especially since the 16th century. This long time span coincides with that of modern capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy.

The unfettered exploitation of natural resources, combined with the appropriation of, and discrimination against, everything that was viewed as being close to the natural world – slaves, women, indigenous peoples – interfered with nature to such a degree that we now view nature, to a large extent, as a product of that interference. In this light, nature is as human as we are, even if in a radically different way. Under this conception, the virus may be said to mirror Goethe's *Faust* or *Los Caprichos*, by Goya, according to whom '*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*' ('The sleep of reason produces monsters').

Thus, the virus is in fact as human as can be, with a humanity that is radically *other* than the humanity we attribute to ourselves. The signs sent out by the virus are no longer opaque but rather transparent, if we bear in mind that the human being who now is getting infected by it is the same person who has been infecting and abusing nature for centuries. The two processes are tightly interwoven. Communication is possible in this case; translation and pedagogy are still intercultural, but cease to be intervital in order to become intravital.

The virus becomes our contemporary in the deepest sense. To that extent, signal-based communication becomes possible because, as we know, it is the precondition of such communication that the same visual field be shared. Where communication is possible, learning becomes possible too.

Thinking through science, public health and the virus

K. SRINATH REDDY

DID the Covid-19 virus choose to leave its forest abode and make its dramatic entry into the wider world at a time when public health was being choked by the knee of anti-science propaganda and environmental sustainability was melting away in the rising heat of climate change? While it would be fanciful to credit the tiny microbe with such deliberate intent, the dance of the debutante virus on a pandemic platform has certainly been directed by human folly.

The virus has, however, proved to be a great teacher of science as well as sustainable development. Apart from posing riddles about its mode of

spread, extent of infectivity, accuracy of testing methods and efficacy of treatment regimens, it also threw up questions on statistical indicators that portray the speed, severity and shape of the epidemic as it races across several countries. It became the source of knowledge on terms hitherto unfamiliar to most, such as exponential growth, flattening of the curve, contact tracing, social distancing and community transmission. While these are important for epidemic control, the major lessons it has delivered relate to the origins of this virus attack from induced ecological imbalance and the changes that we need to make in our

developmental choices and behaviours as an integral part of the earth's ecosystem.

Covid-19 is a zoonotic disease caused by the SARS Cov-2 virus. Diseases caused by agents that spread from animals to humans are classified as zoonotic. Over two-thirds of the new outbreaks in the past half century have been zoonotic. This is because human beings have created conveyor belts for the transport of viruses and vectors hitherto confined to forest dwelling wild life into captive bred veterinary populations and human habitat. Apart from the much discussed fetish for feeding on the flesh of exotic animals, the major reason for such anthropogenic microbial migration is deforestation that results from expansion of agriculture, urban growth, mining and timber trade.

These forest dwelling viruses can jump from their primary hosts into other species. This 'spillover' into a large human host population, either directly or through an intermediate animal host, gives the virus an opportunity to multiply and mutate to more virulent forms. As infected humans commute far and fast, the virus hitchhikes with them to new population groups and finds other susceptible individuals to move into. While in the confines of the forestry, the virus would not be virulent lest it exhaust the limited population of its host and thereby endanger the survival of its own species. Given very large numbers of the new animal or human host, the virus can turn more virulent without running the risk of obliterating its own genetic lineage. The ability of a virus to exchange genetic material with other viruses also adds a dangerous dimension by leading to the emergence of new and more virulent forms.

The virus belongs to the family of Corona viruses. While there are

hundreds of these viruses among animals, this is the seventh virus in the family to be associated with human infections. The Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), other corona viruses which staged their appearance earlier, were far deadlier but much less infectious than the Covid-19 virus which now goes by the scientific name of SARS-CoV2. More innocuous corona viruses are agents of common cold.

The 'corona' or crown of the virus is made of spike proteins. These fit snugly onto the ACE2 receptors which are plentiful in respiratory and vascular endothelium which lines the respiratory tract and blood vessels. These receptors are intended by nature to be the landing pads for the Angiotensin Converting Enzyme (ACE) which is an important physiological mediator of many functions which include blood pressure regulation. By using these receptors to unlock entry into the endothelial cells, the virus enters the cells of various organs and tissues, captures their genetic material and replicates itself.

The virus mostly enters the human body through three portals. They are the nose, mouth and eyes. All of them are connected to the respiratory tract. The eyes too are connected to the nose via the naso-lachrymal duct through which tear drops and infectious conjunctival exudates can flow into the nose. Our hands are the agents that transfer the virus from surfaces and fomites, on which droplets have landed from an infected person who coughs or sneezes, on to the face. While droplet spread is considered the main form of spread, aerosol formation can occur and persist for several hours as viral clouds in crowded indoor spaces. The incubation period, from viral entry into the body to the development of symp-

toms, varies between 2 to 14 days but is usually around 5-6 days.

The Covid-19 virus was initially considered to be a respiratory virus like SARS-CoV2, mostly affecting the lungs. Even while infecting the respiratory tract, the novel virus has a large presence in the upper respiratory tract, while extending lower into the lungs. Two types of cells in the nose have been found to be especially preferred sites for viral lodging. Hence the propensity to be discharged even during loud speech or forceful breathing, apart from coughing or sneezing.

However, this virus does not confine itself to the respiratory tract. Because it can attack the ACE2 receptors in the lining of blood vessels, it can spread across the body and attack any organ. Heart, brain, pancreas, kidneys, intestines and other organs have been found to be infected. Testes have a high density of ACE2 receptors. This may be one of the contributors greater severity of Covid-19 infection in males. Besides direct infection, the virus can also trigger immunological and inflammatory responses that can attack many parts of the body. The threat to life comes from viral pneumonia which affects both lungs and reduces their capacity to breathe and enrich the body's blood with oxygen. Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS) is a particularly dangerous manifestation wherein damage caused by inflammatory reactions to the permeable membrane that lies between the lung tissue and blood capillaries results in flooding of the airspaces.

Because of its propensity to attack the lining of blood vessels, the virus causes micro-angiopathy which can lead to extensive clotting. Pulmonary embolism can also result from venous thrombosis and contribute to fatal outcomes. Inflammation of the brain (encephalitis) is also known to

occur, as the virus crosses the blood brain barrier or travels along the olfactory nerve, from the nose to the olfactory bulb which is related to the perception of smell. The heart is affected through inflammation of the heart muscle (myocarditis) or by thrombosis in the coronary arteries.

The body has non-specific innate immunity with which it tries to fight the intruder. This may not be sufficient by itself. Healthy diets, adequate sleep and regular physical activity build such immunity. Whether prior BCG or polio vaccination builds non-specific immunity to protect against the virus is hypothetical and is being tested in clinical trials of prevention in high risk groups such as the elderly and healthcare workers.

The novel virus also evokes specific immunological responses, through two pathways. First is the formation of antibodies which may be able to neutralise the virus. These are produced by B lymphocytes and are of two types. The IgM antibody levels start rising in the second week after infection but fade away by the fourth week. The IgG antibody appears late in the second week, peaks in four weeks and fades over time thereafter. The other is through cell mediated immunity which is provided by T. lymphocytes. The relative importance, of each of these arms of the immune response to the Covid-19 virus, is unclear at present.

IgG antibody levels, in persons who have recovered, decline in three months according to recent reports. The role of cellular immunity has not been adequately investigated for us to assess the extent and duration of its protective effect. Thus, the promise of long lasting immunity is nebulous at present. What implications this has for the protective effect of a vaccine remains to be seen. Interestingly, llamas have been found to have naturally

occurring antibodies which weakly bind to the virus. These can be engineered to create new nano-bodies which tightly bind to the virus.

However, the body's immune responses to the virus can also become self-defeating in the later stages of the infection. A large number of cytokines and chemokines are generated by the body, as part of the inflammatory response. These protein messengers signal distress and attract inflammatory cells. While useful in early combat against the virus, triggering of large scale production in later stages will damage the body's own tissues through their indiscriminate use of fire power. This leads to ARDS and multiple organ failure, with a fatal outcome in many whose bodies are battered by this storm. More than the level of virus load and the direct tissue damage it causes, it is the inflammatory response gone awry that seems to result in fatal outcomes. Misdirected 'friendly fire' can have huge 'collateral damage'.

Since the Covid-19 virus was initially viewed mainly as a respiratory virus, the triad of symptoms associated with its infection included fever, cough and breathlessness. These remain the main symptoms to look for. Though these overlap with influenza and common cold, there are some distinguishing features like dry cough and more severe breathlessness in Covid-19. However, several other features were recognised and later added to the symptom list. These include features such as fatigue, chills, muscle pains, headache, diarrhoea, loss of smell and loss of taste. The last two have attracted great interest as they seem to occur far more frequently than in influenza and common cold and last longer.

Physical signs are mainly related to fever and, if the lungs are involved, clinical features of pneumonia or res-

piratory distress. Unfortunately, many affected persons, who have deteriorating lung function with falling oxygen levels in the blood, do not recognise it and manifest 'happy hypoxia'. That is why finger pulse oximetry has been recommended to persons diagnosed to have Covid-19 infection. The clinical features of viral pneumonia, multi-organ failure and circulatory collapse occur in a small minority.

A particularly distinctive feature of this virus, compared to SARS-CoV1, is that many infected persons can remain asymptomatic or mildly asymptomatic. This makes diagnosis and surveillance difficult. It is possible that some of the 'asymptomatic' persons were pre-symptomatic and developed symptoms after the test was conducted. Some others may have had atypical symptoms like loss of smell or taste which were previously not considered diagnostic of Covid-19. Even so, it does appear that a sizeable proportion of Covid-19 affected persons (possibly around a quarter and mostly young) will be truly asymptomatic.

The virus has been observed to have particularly severe manifestations in elderly persons and those with co-morbidities. Persons over 60 years of age and those with pre-existing hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, respiratory disease, obesity or any immunocompromised state, will carry greater risk of an adverse outcome. Younger persons generally fare better. Healthcare providers who are repeatedly exposed to high viral loads are especially high risk. Children were initially assumed to be unaffected but recently a multi-organ immunologically mediated inflammatory condition has been described in a small number of them.

After the WHO Director General passionately declared that all countries must heed the imperative of testing all

persons suspected of contracting the virus, the focus on diagnostic tests was heightened among policymakers, health professionals, media and the public. Understanding on the types, indications, interpretation and limitations of the tests was, however, limited in these groups.

Viral detection tests are of two types. Nucleic acid tests (exemplified by RT-PCR) detect the speed of viral RNA replication in samples extracted from the respiratory tract. Usually, nasal or throat swabs are collected through special test kits. Recently, saliva samples are also being used in some places. Rarely, broncho-alveolar lavage is performed to collect samples from deep down in the respiratory tract. The RT-PCR test has been credited with high specificity (the ability to exclude false positive test results in the uninfected) but only modest sensitivity (the ability to detect true positive cases who are infected). Sensitivity is partly dependant on the timing of the test during the course of the infection and the ability to extract a good sample for testing. A sensitivity of 60-70% means that 30-40% of truly infected persons may not be identified.

The antigen test is used to identify protein components of the virus. The 'Spike Protein' is most often the target of this search. It is easier to perform and the result can be obtained in less than 30 minutes, while the RT-PCR takes several hours for processing and reporting. However, this advantage is blunted by a low sensitivity which is even lower than that of RT-PCR. The antigen test has been reported to detect only 50-80% of the infections detected by RT-PCR. Given the modest sensitivity of the RT-PCR itself, it means that over half of the infected persons could be missed by the antigen test.

Even the specificity of the RT-PCR test to accurately diagnose an active viral infection has been recently challenged. Several countries reported persons who tested positive, then negative and again positive despite good clinical recovery and even immunological evidence of antibody response. After detailed investigations, it was concluded that these were due to 'dead viruses' triggering RNA recognition. The most egregious case was of a mother in Montreal who was separated from her newborn child for 55 days because of repeated false positive nucleic acid tests.

The serological tests identify the presence of IgM and IgG antibodies developed by an infected person. Their diagnostic accuracy is affected by three factors. If tested too early in the infection, antibodies will not be detected. They may also be found from previous exposure to other corona viruses. If used in population surveys, with a large number of asymptomatic persons, false positivity rates will rise because of a mathematical principle called the Bayes Theorem. It shows the dependency of the post-test probability both on the pre-test probability and the test result. When the pre-test probability is very low, the post-test probability is not high despite a positive test result. Nevertheless, antibody tests can be used to compare virus exposure rates in different population rates. They are not suitable for characterising the exposure or immune status of an individual with a high degree of confidence.

In clinical settings, other tests can help to improve diagnostic accuracy in case of uncertainty. Chest X-Rays and CT scans of the chest which show patches of pneumonia help to increase the estimates of probability from those provided by clinical symptoms, even when tests are nega-

tive. Given the modest sensitivity of the RT-PCR and antigen tests, it is recommended that a person may be managed as Covid-19 if highly suggestive clinical features indicate a high probability.

Several statistical terms have come to the fore in describing the course of the epidemic. The R_0 (R Nought) or the basic 'Reproductive Number' refers to the number of persons an infected person can infect. This is much higher with aerial spread, as in the case of measles. With the Covid-19 virus initial estimates of R_0 ranged from 3 to 7. The epidemic is judged to come under control when R_0 falls below 1. It must be noted that the R_0 is not homogenous across the country at any time. It is lower in less crowded rural areas than in crowded urban areas. Infectivity has also been noted to be higher in crowded gatherings which can give rise to 'super spreader' events. Such events have been reported from closed areas like bars, restaurants, churches, musical events and night clubs and even from outdoor barbecues.

Some individuals can be 'super spreaders' too. Invoking the Pareto principle named after Vilfredo Pareto, an Italian-Swiss economist, it has been projected that 10-20% of the infected persons can give rise to 80-90% of the infections. While identifying such persons involves diligent and extensive contact tracing, super-spreader events can be avoided through regulation and self-restraint.

The 'Exponential Curve' has been extensively pictured in the media, as the course the infection takes in its ascent before it peaks or flattens and then declines. The ascent is marked by an exponential growth rate of daily infections. Interventions are judged to show impact only when the curve flattens. However, the rate of rise of the

curve can also be slowed down by interventions and the growth may no longer be exponential. The 'doubling time' of cases has been often cited as a measure by which the epidemic is gathering or losing pace but as the base count rises the doubling time stretches even if a number of new cases are occurring. The doubling time of cases is also influenced by the testing rates.

As the principal objective of countering the virus is to reduce the deaths caused by it, two measures of death have emerged, besides the daily death counts. Case Fatality Rate (CFR) is frequently cited to assess the level of control over time. However, the denominator of total diagnosed cases will vary according to testing rates. With extensive testing, more cases will be detected and many of them will be mild and do not contribute to deaths in the numerator. The CFR will then fall, even if the daily death counts are rising, as seen in USA.

Total cases and total deaths are not useful for international or even inter-state comparisons, unless adjusted for the population size. Deaths per million (DPM) will provide that advantage but will not help in tracking the epidemic, as DPM will be a progressively rising number till all deaths cease. Daily death counts will provide that tracker. For minimising the undercounting of deaths, we need to ensure accurate certification of all hospital deaths and assignment of probable cause of death in 'out of hospital' deaths through a verbal autopsy technique based on symptoms and other clinical features preceding death.

As the virus is highly infectious and spreads mainly through droplets, physical (social) distancing of two metres has been advised as a sensible precaution. This is by no means a scientifically validated and precisely determined safe distance. Such a dis-

tance would vary depending on how open or crowded a place is and the prevailing wind conditions. In general, indoor locations, crowded places, close seating, poor ventilation, prolonged conversations or proximity at work would place people at greater risk. Masks, on which there was lack of consensus in the initial months, have now been universally endorsed as necessary by all scientists though not enthusiastically adopted by all citizens. Since eye protection too is needed, transparent face shields are becoming more common, especially during airline travel. Frequent hand washing has been emphasised as a protection against transfer of the virus from contact with a person, surface or object who may carry the virus.

Besides symptom based diagnosis and testing, which help to diagnose and isolate an infected person, it is necessary to undertake energetic and extensive tracing of all recent contacts of any infected person. It helps to identify, test and isolate others who were infected or observe them on quarantine till the end of the likely incubation period.

Community engagement and effective risk communication are essential components of an epidemic response. Social solidarity and health literacy are needed for avoiding stigma, improving case detection, efficient contact tracing and reducing risky behaviours involving groups. Lockdowns represent government imposed discipline. When a lockdown ends, how well people adopt self and group discipline determines the success of control measures. This cannot happen without active citizen engagement.

There are potentially three fire escape routes. The first, much talked about, is herd immunity. The second is immunity conferred by a vaccine. The third is that the virus becomes less virulent

or inactive. Which of these is possible and in what time?

The concept of herd immunity involves a large proportion of the population getting infected and recovering. These persons, who are now presumably immune to reinfection, act as barriers in transmission to the uninfected persons who are thereby protected. Estimates of the Herd Immunity Threshold (HIT) for the Covid-19 virus have ranged between 40-80% but are mostly around 60-70% of the population. Community surveys in most affected countries of Europe and North America have shown antibody prevalence ranging between 5-10%, with a few pockets reaching higher levels between 10-20%. The largest survey so far, in the severely affected country of Spain, showed only 5% prevalence of antibodies in the population.

Also, 'herd protection' is available to uninfected persons only when they stay within the herd that has crossed the HIT. Assume that the population of Delhi reaches the HIT of 70%. Even then, persons in the uninfected group of 30% will not be safe if they travel to another herd, for example Ranchi or Raipur where the viral exposure level may be at only 5-10% of the population. The number of previously infected persons there is too low to block transmission. All of India will take long to reach the HIT for Covid-19.

The second potential saviour is a vaccine. While several candidates are being actively investigated, we await large-scale trial results to assess if a safe and efficacious vaccine has been identified. This is likely to happen by the end of 2020 or the beginning of 2021, even by the most optimistic estimates. After that come the huge logistical challenges of mass scale production and swift distribution, to meet global needs with efficiency and

equity. Persons at the highest risk, such as healthcare providers, the elderly and persons with severe co-morbidities, have to be prioritised for early administration of the approved vaccine.

However, there is cause for concern on the duration of protection. Recent reports suggest that the antibodies developed through natural infection decline by three months. Some anecdotal reports, on persons who recovered from the first infection but experienced symptomatic reinfection again in a few months, add to the concern. Will cell mediated immunity last longer? We do not know yet. A short duration of infection induced immunity also raises doubts about herd immunity.

The prospect of the virus growing less virulent over time, due to high ambient temperatures and humidity, have not found evidence yet. However, evolutionary biology may show us the path. If a virus that acquired virulence only when it had the luxury of a large and almost unlimited host to infect, we may be able to push it back into a less virulent form by creating a bumpy road for it to travel and making its transmission difficult. Then the imperatives of species preservation may make it assume a milder form, to avoid exhausting its host. While theoretical in case of this virus, there is precedence of some other viruses mutating to milder forms over time.

The threat of zoonotic viral infections will not cease with this virus. If we continue to wreak havoc on the environment especially through deforestation, and pursue unsustainable methods of agriculture and livestock breeding, we will not only hasten global warming but give viruses dwelling in wild animal a fast track entry into human bodies. More than vaccines and ventilators, the safety of human life will be determined by the sanctity of our environment and the sanity of our living habits.

Covid-19: dodgy science, woeful ethics

SURANYA AIYAR

WHAT is epidemiology? It is surprising how few of us know anything about it. In the Age of Science, the one thing that we can be sure of is that wherever we go, most people *won't know much science*.

But they have faith in it.

A lot has changed in science from when I was a teenager in the late 1980s. Computers had only just begun to come on the scene. Algorithms were just a type of equation. Science was about dreaming of the day when Stephen Hawking would finally solve the riddle of the Universe with his Grand Unified Theory of Physics. Science was wonder and mystery. It was not so much about what you knew, but about what you did not know. In some types of science, like quantum physics, it was about what you could *never* know, as you endlessly contemplated those elusive subatomic particles that changed even as you looked

at them. Were they defying you to ever really know the secret of the universe?

At that time, we were all familiar with the figure of the Mad Scientist and his twin, the Nutty Professor. We used to laugh at their absent-mindedness, their enthusiasm for ideas that defied common sense and their evil designs on us, that only *they* seemed not to know were doomed to fail. Beneath the hilarity, we were keenly aware of something quite serious. Even as we laughed at the Mad Scientist and Nutty Professor, we remembered Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Eugenics Movement, the Genocide of World War II, Albert Einstein's deep angst over the atomic bomb and the threat of nuclear war.

Cut to the 21st century, and things were rather different. Gone was the mystery of science. The science was now 'Settled'. It had been 'Settled' by supercomputers. There was no sign of the Mad Scientist or the Nutty Professor. In this new world, no one laughed at scientists and everyone knew what

* Suranya Aiyar's paper, 'Covid-19: Dodgy Science, Woeful Ethics', is available on covidlectures.blogspot.com (<https://covidlectures.blogspot.com/>).

an algorithm was. Stephen Hawking wrote, what would turn out to be his last book, *The Grand Design*, in which he said that he had come to the conclusion that there would never be a Grand Unified Theory of Physics. He said this had something to do with the limits of physics as a method and the universe as its subject. But no one noticed because now we had algorithms to tell us 'Everything'.

We were primed for this. There is no way, otherwise, that we would have fallen for the Grand-Covid-Chicken-Little-End-of-the-World-Venture, as we have done.

Let us start with understanding what epidemiologists do. Epidemiologists work with algorithms that are supposed to enable you to calculate the total number or size of a phenomenon by taking into account the variables that affect it. They feed the numbers for different variables into a computer that has been programmed to run calculations using the chosen algorithm. The results of these calculations can be plotted on a graph, to give you the curves with which we have all now become so familiar.

But a computer can only run the variables according to the algorithm. It cannot tell you what those variables should be, and herein lies the rub. Deciding which variables are relevant to the phenomenon you are studying is not a mathematical exercise, but a theoretical one. Ideally, you should have a solid theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under study, on the basis of which you can identify, in a rigorous, stable and complete way, the set of variables that apply. An estimation using mathematical modelling is not merely about putting a number on different elements in your equation. It is, in essence, a theory of what elements to include in the equation, and how they relate to each other.

But epidemiologists are not big on theory; they don't spend much time thinking about whether they have taken into account all the factors that drive a disease outbreak, or their relative importance. There is no great understanding, *in principle*, of any disease or any population. They prefer to run with working assumptions, which they keep changing as things unfold in the real world, with whatever disease they are modelling. Since these assumptions are made without much knowledge of the biology of the pathogen; or the population under study; or of the actual practice of medicine, you do not have to be a mathematical modeller to predict that things are likely to go wrong.

The writer and mathematician, Cathy O'Neil, puts it in this way in her book, *Weapons of Math Destruction*: 'models are by their very nature, simplifications. No model can include all of the real world's complexity... Inevitably some important information gets left out... to create a model, then, we make choices about what's important enough to include, simplifying the world in a toy version that can be easily understood and from which we can infer important facts and actions.'

After putting together their back-of-the-envelope variables, epidemiologists then start the exercise of 'fitting' their models to the data. As the information and data for the disease comes in, the quantities assigned to different variables in their model are changed so as to produce the outcome that is observed. On this basis, epidemiologists will work backwards to tell you, for instance, the 'Reproduction Number' or 'R', which is the number of people who can be infected by one ill person; this is a key estimate that epidemiologists use to predict the rate of transmission of a disease. After back-calculating to infer the R, they then use this R value

to work *forwards* to predict the number of cases.

Do you see the circularity of the reasoning? Where this keeps going wrong is that because there is no understanding *in principle*, of how the virus behaves, or why some people fall ill and others don't, your prediction based from the inference of present behaviour is only as good as your assumption about if and how the R is going to change over time.

We have, in very recent memory, all been the victims of the virtual reality that balloons out of this kind of feedback logic, viz., the World Financial Crash of 2007-08. Writing about the junk mortgage-backed securities that were okayed by investment banks based on mathematical risk modelling, Cathy O'Neill writes: 'mathematical models, by their nature, are based on the past, and on the assumption that patterns will repeat.' The assumption with sub-prime mortgages was that everyone would not default on loans at the same time. But then they did, and it all came crashing down. In O'Neill's words, 'The... false assumption was that not many people would default at the same time. This was based on the theory, soon to be disproven, that defaults were largely random and unrelated events... The risk models were assuming that the future would be no different from the past.'

What makes epidemiological modelling even more unreliable is that epidemiologists do not even spend much time identifying their underlying estimates or assumptions when assembling the variables for their equation. So, assumptions will be built into the epidemiologists' models that they are not even aware of.

What's wrong here is not the maths, but the science, or rather the lack thereof. It is said of modelling that

your prediction is only as good as your data: ‘garbage in, garbage out’. But this really obscures the uncertainty, incompleteness and messiness that is embedded in epidemiological thinking. Your model is really only as good as the theory on which it is based, and epidemiologists have very poor theories, if at all, behind their models. Often it is a case of *garbage all the way down*.

Modelling may be helpful, but only as an adjunct to a more rigorous theoretical understanding of a disease. The number of cases that we see for a disease are merely its outward manifestation. To truly understand a disease, we need to dig much deeper into the biology of the pathogen itself, as well as the way in which the human body responds to it. If we have a correct understanding of these things, then we can, perhaps, accurately model the disease. But without this knowledge, modelling is a terrible way to evaluate anything. Even if it turns out to be right, it is so only by chance.

In the Covid crisis, another problem we have is that although we have so many numbers flying around – case numbers! deaths! case fatality rates! doubling rates! – we have very little information to really make sense of them. In particular, we have little information about other diseases with which to compare the (so-called) Covid data.

This is a problem because a number by itself gives very limited information, and numbers that are very small or very large can be misleading if taken simply by themselves. If I tell you that Iceland has only 100 deaths from infectious disease a year, that tells you one thing. If I tell you that Iceland overall has only 2000 or so deaths a year, that tells you another. If I tell you that India has 31 lakh Covid cases, that tells you one thing. If I tell you that India has over 31 lakh tuberculosis

cases a year, that tells you another thing. If I tell you that India has over 57,000 Covid deaths, that tells you one thing. If I tell you that India has 2.7 to 4.0 lakh tuberculosis deaths, 10 lakh diarrhoeal disease deaths and six lakh respiratory disease deaths a year, that tells you several other things.

If I tell you that the USA has 57 lakh Covid cases, while its annual tuberculosis and HIV cases are 10 lakh each, that tells you something. When I tell you that the US typically has 60 thousand deaths a year from respiratory infections and the death toll from Covid is 1.7 lakh and counting, that tells you something else. If I tell you that the US has 22 to 24 lakh deaths a year from non-infectious diseases, that tells you yet a third thing. So, in order for us to really speak intelligibly about the Covid numbers, we have to know something about what the numbers are for other diseases.

But here we run into the difficulty that in the normal course, we do not follow disease in real time, counting cases and deaths as they emerge, and estimating severity from there as we have done for Covid-19. We do not have outbreak curves for any other disease because these were never plotted in real time as they were done for Covid-19. So we never had an outbreak curve from another disease with which we could compare the Covid ones.

We also have no actual *counting* of cases for other diseases. In order to determine the case incidence or mortality rate for any disease epidemiologists need to do estimation. Yes, estimation again. So anything you hear about the number of cases for tuberculosis, AIDS or malaria in any country is not actual counts, rough aggregations or averages of cases. They are modelled estimates, which are, therefore, subject to all the uncer-

tainties and inaccuracies that we just discussed about epidemiological modelling.

This means that we are all punching in the dark when we are trying to figure out exactly what the Covid numbers mean. Even World Health Organization (WHO) mortality data needs to be placed in context in the same way. If you study the notes to the WHO world mortality data, you will discover that it assigns varying degrees of certainty as to the accuracy of deaths reported under different heads of disease:¹ For a given year there may be no data at all, and the figure reported is... you guessed it... ‘estimated’ again. The WHO makes these estimates even for countries with *no* death registration data for the year under study, or with no information on the cause of death, or with no data for a particular disease. Even the disease to which the deaths are attributed can be done by estimation.

The estimation is made from various things like projections based on available mortality data for a previous period, or estimating deaths by looking at the demographic profile of a country, ‘interpolation/extrapolation of number of deaths of missing country-years’, ‘scaling of total deaths by age and sex to previously estimated WHO all-cause envelopes’, estimating adult mortality from child mortality and a key called the ‘WHO modified logit life table system’, and so on.

The WHO does not even carry out estimations every year. Mortality estimates are carried out only every

1. See, for instance, https://www.who.int/healthinfo/global_burden_disease/estimates_country_2004_2008/en/ and ‘Mortality and Burden of Disease Estimates for WHO Member States’ issued by WHO’s Department of Measurement and Health Information and ‘WHO Methods and Data Sources for Country-Level Causes of Death 2000-2016’, dated 2018.

two or three years, and take several years to be finalized. The 2008 estimates, for example, were updated in 2011, after taking comments from all countries. For later years, for the moment, all that the WHO seems to have are modelled estimates by the American epidemiological institute called the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME). The WHO estimates from after the year 2008 do not say whether they have been circulated to countries for comments, and there is nothing to indicate that anyone from IHME, which is headquartered in the remote State of Washington in the USA, has ever been to countries like India for which they have done these estimations.

The WHO says that you cannot compare the country-wise data, or even the year-wise data. But what do the numbers mean if you can't compare either year-on-year figures for a country, or country-to-country figures with each other? As I said earlier, *garbage all the way down*.

So even comparing deaths from one disease to another only takes you so far. It is a quagmire of estimates.

There is no escaping the uncertainties of disease estimation, even with large-scale testing. Even though some countries tried to do real-time testing to assess rates of Covid infection, no country had the resources to test everyone. Even population-wide testing, if it can be done, will only give you a snapshot of the infections at the moment. To keep tabs on disease prevalence via universal testing over a period of time, the entire population would have to be tested periodically.

So what we have here are three levels of missing science and information – the general lack of scientific knowledge in the public; the lack of science in epidemiological modelling; and the absence and impossibility

of getting any numerical information about diseases that can form a truly reliable standard against which to judge the Covid numbers with which we are being assaulted, ambushed and disarmed. Talk about death by numbers. It's a billion! Bam! Now y'er dead.

So where does this leave us? Is there a Covid-19 pandemic or is it all a fantasy of the epidemiologists? Covid-19 is not a fantasy, but we have not been seeing it for what it is. We have only been looking at the supercomputer-aided and algorithm-abetted drama performed by the epidemiologists.

The epidemiologists told us that if Covid-19 was allowed to spread unchecked, then billions would be infected, and millions would die. The WHO and public health experts told us that, therefore, we had to have a disease containment strategy that would stop the virus from spreading. Then the epidemiologists and the WHO came together in a rousing *jugalbandi* exhorting us to 'flatten the curve!' The idea, they said, was to bring the number of infections to within manageable levels.

But Covid-19 proved to be unmanageable whether you had one case or a billion. For reasons that we do not, as yet, understand, Covid can be mild and clear up in a few days, or have you choking to death in nine days flat. No amount of flattening the curve can solve this problem. And it is a problem of some significance if you or a loved one is *on* the curve, however flat it may be.

Why, when antivirals were known to be effective in reducing the severity of viral infections, was the WHO and public health field in general so focused on 'non-pharmaceutical' interventions? Because we *do* have medicines for viral diseases. This is how AIDS was brought under control. With antiviral drugs you can be HIV-

positive for years, indeed for decades, without falling ill.

Antivirals and medicines like hydroxychloroquine do not 'cure' viral disease, in the sense of eliminating them from the body, but they are well known to reduce the severity of infection, which can also be life saving. In the epidemiological work on pandemic influenza, the assumption is that antivirals can be given for viral infections, both as a preventive and as treatment: 'prompt treatment with antivirals reduces clinical severity and infectiousness.'² Even the WHO has acknowledged the efficacy of antiviral drugs and medicines like hydroxychloroquine in retarding the progress of viral infections.³

We need to turn away from those exponential graphs, and look into why disease containment rather than treatment has become the guiding principle of public health interventions for epidemics, despite the availability of medicines. The formal name for disease containment is 'Non-Pharmaceutical Measures'. This gives us some hint of what might be going on. The negation implied in this expression is of Pharmaceutical Measures, i.e., *medicines*. Did the idea of disease containment arise as an *alternative* to, or perhaps even in *opposition* to, pharmaceutical measures?

Writing in 2006 about non-pharmaceutical interventions for pandemic influenza, the WHO Writing Group rejects the feasibility of pharmaceutical interventions saying that

2. Ferguson et al., 'Strategies for Mitigating an Influenza Pandemic', *Nature* 442, July 2006, p. 448, 27. <https://www.nature.com/articles/nature04795>

3. COVID-19 – virtual press conference, WHO, 30 March 2020. https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/transcripts/who-audio-emergencies-coronavirus-press-conference-full-30mar2020.pdf?sfvrsn=6b68bc4a_2

the availability of antiviral agents is ‘insufficient’ and that while pandemic preparedness ‘ideally would include pharmaceutical countermeasures (vaccine and antiviral drugs), but for the foreseeable future, such measures will not be available for the global population [of more than] 6 billion’.⁴

But this was clearly a huge underestimation of the capacity of countries to deploy antivirals. Poorer countries in Asia and Africa were the first to use antivirals, viral inhibitors and other therapies like hydroxychloroquine, ivermectin, plasma therapy and faviparvir for Covid-19 treatment. It was Bangladesh that led the way with ivermectin and doxycycline. If anything, it was rich countries with their, in the case of Continental and Nordic Europe, total lack of innovation in pharmaceuticals, and, in the case of the USA, cumbersome clinical trials that lagged behind in finding pharmaceutical interventions for Covid-19.

While it may be impossible to produce drugs for all the 7 or 8 billion people in the world in a short period of time, this is not the way any disease progresses. You will not have all these people falling ill at once; and given the vast numbers of mild cases for Covid-19, not even all those who do fall ill will need pharmaceutical intervention.

If you think about it, this was surely something that the WHO knew very well already. Could the truth lie in the fact that no one wanted to encourage the idea of drugs when this might have meant footing the bill (or giving up patents) for drugs for infectious diseases which, until Covid-19, were

really only a problem for low-income countries in Africa? High income countries have a tiny disease burden from infectious disease compared with non-infectious disease (cancers and heart disease), and middle income countries show epidemiological transition, with a reducing burden of infectious disease, and an increasing one under the head of non-infectious disease.

For many years, there has been something dysfunctional in the western approach to drugs for infectious diseases. A particularly sordid episode occurred during the Ebola outbreak of 2014-16 in West Africa. Some European and American health workers who caught Ebola there, were flown back home for treatment. Most of them were cured after being given a cutting-edge medication called ‘ZMapp’. There was outrage in West Africa where people had been told for decades that Ebola had no cure.

Initially it was claimed in America that just seven doses of ZMapp were available, which had all been used up, and so nothing remained to be sent to West Africa. But there was widespread speculation that ZMapp was still being sent to Spain and other places for repatriated European health workers. The governments of Nigeria and Liberia immediately requested for the medicine to be sent to them, even while western commentators were delivering sermons on the indispensability of clinical trials.

The WHO stepped in to say that given the emergency situation, experimental use of the drug should be allowed in West Africa. This led to an outcry from academics in the UK and Australia against the use of medicines for Ebola. They made arguments such as that looking at medicines merely to cure a few patients was ‘individualistic’ or that this somehow betrayed the purported wider community good of disease-containment measures.^{5,6}

Luckily, common sense prevailed over these academic fulminations, and ZMapp was sent to Liberia and Nigeria. So much for the claim that ‘only 7’ doses were available.⁷ Old hands at the Ebola game in West Africa, Peter Piot and David Heymann, stepped in to say that given the severity of Ebola, they themselves would have been happy to try experimental drugs had they contracted this disease. They also said, pointedly, that if Ebola had broken out in the West then it was ‘highly likely’ that the authorities would have speeded up the testing of experimental drugs for it.⁸ This turned out to be prescient going by the promptness with which remdesivir was put to trial in the USA after Covid-19 came to its shores.

The West owes a debt to Ebola and West Africa. It was only after West Africans insisted on access to experimental drugs that attention was finally given to working on Ebola drugs, and it is in the course of this work that remdesivir was developed.^{9,10}

Even though the world went into an unprecedented lockdown that

4. ‘Nonpharmaceutical Interventions for Pandemic Influenza, International Measures’, World Health Organization Writing Group, Centres for Disease Control and Prevention Vol 12, Number 1, January 2006. https://www.nc.cdc.gov/eid/article/12/1/05-1370_article.

5. Annette Rid and Ezekiel J. Emanuel, ‘Ethical Considerations of Experimental Interventions in the Ebola Outbreak’, *The Lancet* 384, 22 November 2014. [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(14\)61315-5.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(14)61315-5.pdf)

6. Angus J. Dawson, ‘Ebola: What it Tells us About Medical Ethics’, *The Journal of Medical Ethics* 41, 2015, pp. 107-110. <https://jme.bmj.com/content/41/1/107>; Christian A. Gericke, ‘Ebola and Ethics: Autopsy of a Failure’, *BMJ*, 2015, p. 350. <https://www.bmj.com/content/350/bmj.h2105>

7. ‘Trial of Ebola Drug ZMapp Launches in Liberia’, US, Centre for Disease Research & Policy, 27 February 2015. <https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/news-perspective/2015/02/trial-ebola-drug-zmapp-launches-liberia-us>

8. ‘Africans, Three Ebola Experts Call for Access to Trial Drug’, *Los Angeles Times*, 6 August 2014. <https://www.latimes.com/world/africa/la-fg-three-ebola-experts-release-drugs-20140806-story.html>

9. Op. cit., fn. 7.

was supposed to stop the spread of Covid-19, the cases relentlessly grew and grew. India went into lockdown at some 500 cases, today it is at over 31 lakh cases. Epidemiologists and the public health establishment justify their disease containment approach by saying that ‘flattening the curve’ reduced the number of people who *would have been* struck by the disease had there been no lockdown. But this is no answer. Lockdown, other disease containment measures, and the atmosphere of dread cultivated by them have also caused massive damage to life and health owing to the consequent repression of social and economic activity. The adoption of containment measures was presented by epidemiologists and doctors as a false choice between saving lives and saving the economy. The migrant labour crisis is among the many examples that show us that disease containment kills too.

The ‘flatten the curve’ strategy was unhelpful in many ways. It assumed that saving lives was a matter of providing Covid-19 patients with ventilators and critical care. But ventilators left the picture in Europe and the USA almost as quickly as they had entered it in March. By early April, doctors there began to report that ventilators were not helping all Covid-19 patients, and might even be harming them.¹¹⁻¹⁴ The focus expanded from ventilator-care to other treatments, as doctors began to understand the way in which Sars-Cov-2 attacked the lungs and how the body’s immune system responded

to it. The shift in attention from ventilators to the way the disease progressed in the body, opened up investigation into antivirals and enzyme inhibitors to block those aspects of the body’s natural immune response that were exacerbating the damage caused by the pathogen itself.

In China, Japan, India, Bangladesh and other countries in Asia and Africa, doctors immediately, as early as February and March when Covid-19 was first detected in their borders, began to use drugs like hydroxychloroquine, azithromycin, doxycycline and various antiviral prescriptions like lopinavir, ritonavir, ivermectin and faviparivir for treatment and prevention of Covid-19. The Bangladeshis announced excellent results with a combination of the antiviral ivermectin with the antibiotic doxycycline, and India’s Council of Scientific and Industrial Research began looking into the re-purposing of 25 drugs, including faviparivir, for Covid-19 treatment. These are only some examples from Asia and Africa of the immediate work that started with different therapies to help Covid-19 patients. By late June the USA had put remdesivir on the market and UK scientists announced some success with the use of dexamethasone for critically ill patients.

coronavirus-patients-who-are-put-on-ventilators-ultimately-die-and-some-doctors-are-trying-to-stop-using-them/articleshow/75065623.cms

12. ‘Why Ventilators May Not Be Working As Well for Covid-19 Patients As Doctors Hoped’, *Time*, 16 April 2020. <https://time.com/5820556/ventilators-covid-19/>

13. John J. Marini and Luciano Gattinoni, ‘Management of Covid-19 Respiratory Distress’, *JAMA Insights*, Clinical Update, 24 April 2020. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2765302>

14. ‘Doctors Face Troubling Question: Are They Treating Coronavirus Correctly?’ *The New York Times*, 14 April 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bp5RMutCNoI>

What you thus have is a very different picture of treatment than the one envisaged in the ‘flatten the curve’ model, where everything hinged on ICUs and ventilators.

By mid-May, ICU facilities that had been ‘surged’ by rich western countries, as frantically recommended by their epidemiologists, were being shut down, many without having seen any patients.^{15,16}

A fraction of unlucky patients who might become critically ill may require full ICU intervention, but there are many more options for the rest that the epidemiologists clearly had no idea about. For example, oxygen supplementation can be done at home with hired equipment and without the need for oxygen cylinders, as they concentrate the oxygen from the air.

The WHO and public health thinking in general works with fixed ideas of wealth and hospital resources in evaluating health issues. But what is health and what are resources? Covid-19 reduced to nothing the resources of the world’s richest and most technologically advanced countries. We have to ask ourselves what was the worth of all these resources when looking at the ravages of Covid-19 in countries like the UK and Italy. These are countries that have made public health services into a defining socio-political project from the middle of the last century.

15. ‘US Field Hospitals Stand Down, Most Without Treating Any Covid-19 Patients’, *npr.org*, 7 May 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/07/851712311/u-s-field-hospitals-stand-down-most-without-treating-any-covid-19-patients>; ‘London NHS Nightingale Hospital Will Shut Next Week’, *The Guardian*, 4 May 2020. Link: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/04/london-nhs-nightingale-hospital-placed-on-standby>

16. ‘Covid-19: Nightingale Hospitals Set to Shutdown After Seeing Few Patients’, *BMJ* 369, 7 May 2020. <https://www.bmj.com/content/369/bmj.m1860>

If you follow the discussion amongst doctors in developed western countries, what comes through starkly is the lack of experience in dealing with infectious disease – a condition itself brought about by wealth. Doctors at the epicentre of the Covid outbreak in Northern Italy were quick to intuit the misalignment of their current medical practice with the exigencies of a highly contagious disease like Covid-19: ‘Coronavirus is the Ebola of the rich... The more medicalized and centralized the society, the more widespread the virus...’¹⁷

‘The Coronavirus epidemics should indeed lead to a number of reflections on the organization of healthcare and the way contemporary medicine has lost sight of some diseases, such as infectious ones, that were, probably prematurely, seen as diseases of the past... We have definitely not won the fight against infectious diseases, but we have probably forgotten about them too soon. In a high-technology setting, it is all too easy to forget the overwhelming, often dark power of nature.’¹⁸

Some of the effects of severe Covid-19, such as blood clotting, noticed as new and atypical by western doctors, are similar to those observed in patients in the final stages of any illness when they are headed to sepsis and septic shock.¹⁹ Some of the worse cases of Covid-19 sound similar to patients in the last stages of Ebola in West Africa, or dengue in India. A lot of the issues raised by Italian and

American doctors in March and April, when they were first hit by Covid, about being careful of lung damage from intubation, keeping patients ‘dry’, i.e. being conservative on fluid replacement as this can cause further lung damage, and on the timing of intubation for patients showing severe respiratory distress, are covered as a routine matter in the Indian National Clinical Management Guidelines for Covid-19. This may well be the case for other Asian and African countries as well.

By mid-April there was a recognition even in the West that the blood clotting, and other ‘atypical’ reactions they were observing in Covid-19 patients, might be part of the general deterioration into sepsis as is seen with other severe viral diseases, and there was talk of including anti-coagulants like heparin for critically ill patients. But in India, heparin had been included right at the start for critically ill patients in the National Clinical Management Guidelines for Covid-19. Chinese doctors reporting the clinical course of illness in hundreds of patients in Wuhan hospitals in January, had emphasized the observation of thrombosis (blood clotting) in critical cases and noted that elevated levels of a substance called d-dimers correlated with cases that proceeded to become severe.^{20,21}

While the WHO made the case for disease containment by invoking grim portents for the ‘poor’ and ‘dense’ populations of developing countries, it was these countries that led the charge for finding therapies for Covid-19. The

Americans and Europeans were slower off the mark with antivirals and other drugs than the Asians, Russians and Africans. This may be partly because doctors in Asia and Africa who regularly treat tuberculosis, meningitis, diarrhoeal diseases, dengue and malaria, among other infectious diseases, are more experienced with these drugs than western doctors.

Epidemiologists are like the blind-folded men trying to guess what the elephant was in Gandhiji’s favourite fable. As the men groped at one or other part of the elephant, they kept making the wrong guess at what it was. The one who caught its trunk called it a snake, the one who felt its tusk called it a weapon, and so on. Epidemiologists get things wrong in the same way. A telling example is how the most famous epidemiologists of them all, the Neil Ferguson-led Covid-19 Response Team which included the Imperial College of London and the WHO Centre for Infectious Disease Modelling, assessed the impact of age on their Covid case predictions.

In a report dated 26 March 2020 called ‘The Global Impact of Covid-19 and Strategies for Mitigation and Suppression’ they say: ‘The average size of households that have a resident over the age of 65 years is substantially higher in countries with lower income compared with middle- and high-income countries... Contact patterns between age groups also differ by country; in high-income settings con-

17. Nacoti et al., ‘At the Epicentre of the Covid-19 Pandemic and Humanitarian Crises in Italy: Changing Perspectives on Preparation and Mitigation’, *NEJM Catalyst*, 21 March 2020. <https://catalyst.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/CAT.20.0080>

18. Giordina Barbara Piccoli, ‘Hospitals as Health Factories and the Coronavirus Epidemic’, *Journal of Nephrology* 33, 21 March 2020, pp. 189-191. <https://paperity.org/p/237906528/hospitals-as-health-factories-and-the-coronavirus-epidemic>

19. ‘Unexpected Cause of Death in Younger Covid-19 Patients is Related to Blood Clotting’, *BioSpace*, 28 April 2020. https://www.biospace.com/article/covid-19-increases-risk-of-heart-attacks-and-stroke/?fbclid=IwAR3wum5CgAyBrICQ2eBwQCysU2Evq4iuyV4dqhT7ZP5efdSOVb_KWPKUnw

20. Zhou et al., ‘Clinical Course and Risk Factors for Mortality of Adult Inpatients With

COVID-19 in Wuhan, China: A Retrospective Cohort Study’, *The Lancet* 395, 1054, 28 March 2020, first published on 9 March 2020. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30566-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30566-3/fulltext)

21. Wang et al., ‘Clinical Characteristics of 138 Hospitalized Patients with 2019 Novel Coronavirus-infected Pneumonia in Wuhan, China’, *JAMA* 323(11), 7 February 2020, pp. 1061-1069. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2761044>

tact patterns tend to decline steeply with age. This effect is more moderate in middle-income settings and disappears in low-income settings... indicating that elderly individuals in these settings [lower-income and middle-income countries] maintain higher contact rates with a wide range of age-groups compared to elderly individuals in high-income countries.²²

Based on this the Covid-19 Response Team claimed that the elderly were less vulnerable to infection in high-income settings. They were completely wrong, as they failed to account for the increased exposure of the elderly to infection in the communal setting of the care home, whose deaths tragically constituted 40 to 60% of the Covid deaths in high-income countries in Europe and North America. In Canada and some US states, deaths of care home residents were over 80% of the total Covid deaths.²³

This is only one example of the ways in which epidemiological modelling failed to tell us things that might have been useful in mitigating the worst impact of Covid-19. Another example is the way in which, while we were focused on Wuhan early this

year, the disease was already entering countries from many places at once. If you follow the first cases in different countries, you see a pattern of disease importation from people with no travel history to China. In fact, on nearly every continent, more countries had their first imported cases from Italy than from China. In France, the first major outbreak was in early March from a Church gathering in Mulhouse in Haut Rhin where, till date, no cases appear to have been connected to Wuhan.

In Kenya, the first case (mid-March) was of someone returning from the USA via London. In Iceland, early cases included an import from Austria. In Italy, early cases included imports from Romania and Norway. In Pakistan and India, early cases were imported from Iran. In India's first hotspot of Mumbai, early cases mostly came from the USA. This should not surprise us as the whole idea of the pandemic is that the connectedness of the world is the main risk and driver of such outbreaks. Yet, when the pandemic actually hit us everyone reacted in a very un-pandemic way by focusing only on China.

In Sweden, early contact tracing focused on people with a travel history to Italy owing to some early cases having been connected to travel there. But Swedish officials later announced that while they were focused on Italy, cases were being imported 'below the radar' from many other countries. This is a very clear example of how contact tracing and other containment measures can be misleading in giving the early impression of the infection coming from just one or other place.

Another pattern to which we are failing to give proper attention is the highly clustered nature of Covid-19 outbreaks, with successive disease epicentres losing severity as they emerge.

A phenomenon that cannot be fully explained by lockdown and containment measures, as this is a pattern that holds consistently in different countries, despite differences in the timing and quality of intervention measures. There are many anomalies in Covid transmission that are crying out for attention if only we could snap out of our epidemiology-induced hypnosis. The case onset data from China and Italy (other countries are yet to tabulate this) show that their measures actually came into force at or near the time that infections peaked and plateaued.^{24,25} Given the 14-day incubation period for this disease, lockdown and other measure do not explain this trajectory. Another anomaly is the way in which outbreaks have not been traced to busy bus or metro routes in big cities with Covid outbreaks, or to shopping malls or crowded vegetable mandis. This indicates that the sharing of public spaces may not in and of itself result in significant transmission, and a more intense, intimate and prolonged interaction is required for transmission to occur. If this is true, then the whole idea of stopping public movement to contain Covid transmission is questionable.

By following the epidemiologist's approach of 'flattening the curve', we were all focused on overall numbers. Success in combatting the virus was judged in terms of how many infections we have prevented. But this is a fact over which we can only speculate, while in some places, as in care homes in

22. Report 12: The Global Impact of COVID-19 and Strategies for Mitigation and Suppression, COVID-19 Response Team, 26 March 2020. <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/mrc-global-infectious-disease-analysis/covid-19/report-12-global-impact-covid-19/>

23. International Long Term Care Policy Network, 'Mortality Associated With COVID Among People Who Use Long Term Care', updates of 21 May 2020 and 26 June 2020. Link to 26 June 2020 update here: <https://ltccovid.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Mortality-associated-with-COVID-among-people-who-use-long-term-care-26-June-1.pdf>; 'State-wise data for the USA from Covid-19 brutal on NY long-term care facilities', *The Buffalo Post* quoting Kaiser Family Foundation data, 26 May 2020. https://buffalonews.com/business/local/covid-19-brutal-on-ny-long-term-care-facilities-nationwide-its-worse/article_739b408b-5d34-5b8d-be83-124047368d2b.html

24. Chinese case onset data can be found at Figure 2 on Page 6 of the Report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019, published on 28 February 2020. <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-china-joint-mission-on-covid-19-final-report.pdf>

25. Italian case onset data can be found at: <https://www.epicentro.iss.it/en/coronavirus/sars-cov-2-dashboard>

Europe and North America, we failed to notice and disperse chains of transmission as they emerged. Even today, so many months down the line, we are unable to remove the blinkers that the epidemiologists have put over our eyes to actually *look* at the virus and take into account the totality of its behaviour and peculiarities. What emerges is the limited importance of mathematical modelling and the degree to which thinking in these terms only serves to further confuse and confound us when confronted with a novel disease.

We talk of control, and even after the virus has raced around the world, infecting hundreds of thousands in the richest and most scientifically advanced places, we still think we know and can control it. In this we show the smallness not just of epidemiology, but even of science. At least of the kind of science that we are doing today. Even if we are willing to gamble on defying nature, we have to first be ready to accept that science in its current state knows very little about Sars-Cov-2. Before we can control it, we have to understand it.

Perhaps we can start with this idea – Sars-Cov-2 is part of nature, as are we all. When we went to war against it, the ravages of lockdown have shown us that we ended up hurting ourselves. Disease sits in people. Our war on disease became a war on the people. Whether we like it or not, we and this virus are connected. If we try to understand the nature of this connection, maybe we can reach the happy ending to which science has, so far, always led us. In order for this to happen we need to ditch the epidemiologists and the supercomputers, and encourage the real scientists to go ahead with a sober and uninhibited scientific exploration of Covid-19.

Until science comes to the rescue, we have no choice but take things philosophically. If this is the end, then at least let us go with dignity.

A virus is politicized

ARUNA ROY and NIKHIL DEY

IF the world is indeed a stage, then Covid-19 has turned the play into a tragedy without a denouement. But Act I, Scene 1 has laid the ground rules for what is to follow in India.

The seriousness of the impact of a virus originating in a distant place in another country, with the potential to become a 'pandemic', was barely acknowledged until the prime minister's 'special' (8 pm) address to the nation on 24 March 2020, giving 4 hours to 1.4 billion people to lock themselves

down. India had never heard of, or experienced, a smaller version of this vast draconian exercise. There had never even been a dress rehearsal, and to claim legitimacy for the unpreparedness, this was defined as a 'battle'.

In seeking answers, the Government of India has made a big mistake in strategizing as if for war. Wars need adversaries and enemies. Natural calamities are very often beyond the potential of logic and reasoning, and certainly not responsive to psychologi-

cal warfare. The 'enemy' is not scared, or courageous. The phenomena just 'is'. At the very start, the unexplained lockdown has created adversarial relationships that can never be considered the best way to acknowledge, understand, contain, and best coexist with a virus, so it doesn't become a multitude of pandemics. A tiny powerful think tank in New Delhi primed to function through the politics of power, perception, identity, and group loyalties, will naturally look to perpetuate the inequalities it is comfortable with.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the government even used the virus and the arms of the state to ascribe ridiculous identities to the virus – of religion, class, caste, and region and strengthen the prejudices it thrives on. What might be successful in polarizing communities and securing votes from the majority is a huge impediment in facing challenges of development and democracy. It will create chaos and confusion in trying to bring all segments of society together to face any challenge, including a pandemic.

The virus calls for scientific understanding and a rational approach for safety and detection. The lockdown can go only so far and no further in containing the virus. The Indian state was unpardonable in how it used the lockdown to once again perpetuate discrimination and increase deprivation. The panic in individual and collective consciousness weakened the resolve of most citizens to confront the state and its dictatorial pronouncements. The prime minister's deliberate and sternly announced lockdown went largely unquestioned.

The citizen has become a 'subject' for a policy of trial and error in the chaos that has ensued. The state defined the spread of the virus as a 'war', and pitted the laws of nature

(the virus), against the laws of government (the lockdown).

For vast multitudes of people, the lockdown was a fiat never experienced before. It came as a set of drastic, unquestionable orders, backed by centralized command and control, and the aggressive use of two laws (The Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897, and the Disaster Management Act, 2005) to essentially put all controls in the hands of the central government's Home Ministry and a small team operating under it. The language and imagery of 'war' was invoked. 'War rooms' were set up from districts to states and to the Centre, with chains of command similar to what the armed forces follow at the time of war.

The Indian citizen draws her freedom from the Indian Constitution, and the heart of personal freedoms are found in Article 19(1) of the Constitution. The Epidemic Diseases Act (1897) and the Disaster Management Act (2005), began to be used as instruments in a battle between the state and the people. By forcibly restricting people from being where they felt most secure, the central government might as well have suspended Article 19(1) of the Constitution, and the freedoms enshrined within.

The Constitution of India states in Article 19(1): 'All citizens shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression; to assemble peaceably and without arms; to form associations or unions; to move freely throughout the territory of India; to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India; and to practice any profession, or to carry on any occupation, trade or business.' The lockdown and its authoritarian framework have vitiated many of these constitutional guarantees.

In practice, the one state that set a clear, logical and rational example of combating the virus was Kerala. The

reasons for the success lie in two domains. One, decades of decentralized planning leading to the development of capacities to deal competently with crisis at the local level. And two, serious attention to the spread of a disease in setting up of laboratories and health systems that deal with prevention and detection. In dealing with Nipah, Kerala also dealt with methods and systems of addressing future health concerns. The Government of India would have done well to heed and learn from the Kerala example.

On the contrary, GoI presented strong orders, with relief that was no more than a collection of platitudes. In this top-down and hastily executed method, orders were passed which impacted many aspects of human life – including health, food, travel, and livelihood.

'Don't move. Stay where you are. You will be looked after. Your employers have been ordered to pay you your wages for the lockdown period; your landlords will not charge you room rent; your families needs will be taken care of...' There were a series of assurances with nothing to ensure compliance. Finally, there was the iron fist within the velvet glove – 'Make this sacrifice for the sake of the nation.'

The prime minister set an example for the whole government to assume paternalistic postures. People were not treated as equals who needed to be consistently informed and involved in any planning exercise for dealing with the health emergency, the imminent economic disasters staring everyone in the face, and of the unprecedented restrictions imposed on travel and movement. The entire Covid-19 experience has become a lockdown on both mobility and mobilization. There was no effort made to build a grievance redress system to deal with complaints about governance in Covid-19

times. The government, at every level, has discouraged questioning and in fact, most often threatened those who broke the rules, even if they were migrants trying to get onto trains, buses, private transport, or walking home. There was no transparency in the process of decision-making, or in the money available for relief work.

The statement of 'stay at home and stay safe' was an irony for anyone except the upper-middle class and the elite. Staying home meant living in overcrowded houses, slums, work premises, in urban areas, or in small domestic spaces in rural India. Physical distance necessary for remaining free from Covid-19 was also intrinsically linked to privilege. In fact, by living at home, the workers were divorced from their occupation, employment, wages and daily livelihood.

As a result, as soon as the lockdown was announced, people started packing themselves into buses and trains to head home. The government banned all travel, and closed down road, rail, and air transport. People, determined to get home at any cost, started walking. As horrific images appeared on television screens and stories came through the media, more authoritarian orders were passed to stop people where they were, put them into camps, police them so no one escapes, and at all costs, enforce the lockdown. Lockdowns followed one into the other, like a version of a bizarre computer game – 1.0, 2.0, 3.0. And like some ever unfolding tragedy, people kept flouting orders, overriding restrictions and under the most difficult circumstances kept heading home.

While the affluent were given time and resources to go home, workers were forced to stay where they were with no support from the state. The whole struggle for independence was essentially a demand for territorial

freedom. The right to 'move freely across the territory of India' is constitutionally mandated, to build the grounds for both liberty and fraternity over the geographical area that is India. Given the fact that the lockdown restricted freedom of movement, it was a mass violation of Article 19.

Before the pandemic became big news, there was incessant discussion about 'illegal immigrants' who presumably entered the country in search of work. Internal migration did not register on the radar of political discourse. The freedom of movement existed because business and the corporate sector used internal migration to hire cheap labour and maximize profits. Workers remained largely invisible.

The lockdown has repeatedly shown us how little India's policymakers and so-called educated classes knew about the vast numbers of informal (unorganized) workers – 94% of India's workforce. These workers were the backbone of the Indian economy, responsible for decades of high growth rates. They were also invisible, unrecognized, disrespected, and were workers without rights. The panic of huge establishments in ever being able to recall workers who had left, resulted in the draconian labour law related ordinances being promulgated by some states like UP, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and even Congress ruled Rajasthan. All that neoliberal India wanted was to make sure that these people were available to go back to work and revive growth and the economy.

Migrant worker is a phrase that is pejorative, evoking an image of a poor, ill-clad, semi-literate, rural person, without any sophistication. It is a stigma not to be countenanced by any affluent professional that frequently moves from city to city looking for better opportunities and jobs. The mass

walk back home following the lockdown is *not* a migration. It is a forced relocation of individuals to go back to places of comparative comfort and familiarity. It is, in fact, a distress based, internal displacement of millions of Indian citizens.

Actually, till the migrants by sheer presence, numbers, and visible distress walked home, and forced the attention of a reluctant media onto themselves, they were unseen and unheard by design. As they walked, it was clear that a massive human shift was taking place. However, most of us seem to think that now that workers are no longer seen on the streets, the crisis has passed.

Policymakers, either had no clue about the condition of 93% of India's workforce, or studiously suppressed data and information in a bid to paint an ever 'India Shining'. It is shocking that in contemporary times where computerization and big data has become the norm, we are unable to get numbers of workers classified as 'migrant labour' in states or big cities. Even the numbers who stayed back, or live permanently in the 'bastis', are not known.

There is no clear picture or reliable statistics to be obtained about the number of migrants employed by the establishments in urban areas. Perhaps, while productivity, profits and growth rates are tracked, the condition of workers, and even their names, never really mattered. Properly regulating their work and working conditions has never been a priority. To make matters worse, they are now stigmatized as carriers of the virus, as they reach home in search of social security and a sense of belonging.

During the lockdown, crossing state borders was an illegal act. The police were used to brutally push back those who tried to go home on foot, in

wooden carts, and on bicycles. The perversion of this fundamental right is reminiscent also of the control over movement in apartheid South Africa, and modern-day China, where a person needs to have the state's permission to cross internal borders. The rigid control over territory within the nation state is but the beginnings of 'banning' – a tyrannical practice in preventing people from congregating politically as well. This also dilutes India's federal nature, entrenches regionalism, and heightens the identity debate.

Desperation drove workers to pay exorbitant amounts of money to rent private buses or hide in trucks and containers to cross the border. It is harrowing that both the states and central government not only denied a fundamental right of movement, but compounded this by actually booking migrant workers under the National Disaster Management Act for being outside their houses and 'breaking lockdown rules'.

The immediate concerns for all citizens were clearly even bigger concerns for these vulnerable segments of our citizens – access to health, to food, and to livelihood security in an economic framework that had completely unravelled during the lockdown. As we deal with the virus, we are still trying to understand the magnitude of what the lockdown has done. The vision contained in our policies as we face these challenges, will determine our quality of life – also as a generation of survivors. Regardless of propaganda and political rhetoric, our success in establishing equal basic rights for all in the framework of a welfare state, will determine how this period will be gauged when we look back on these pivotal years.

As soon as the lockdown was declared, there was widespread panic and scrambling for procuring food and

supplies. There were also many stories of hunger and starvation. Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that notwithstanding the lockdown and epidemic, agriculture and food production was the only work that was sustained. It is high time that agriculture is properly recognized as a vital part of our framework of food security, an avenue for employment, and a degree of basic income security for crores of people.

If it were not for the 80 millions tonnes of foodgrain that were in government godowns at the time of the announcement of the lockdown, our capacity to respond to the lack of access to food would have been severely impaired. Similarly, if it were not for the well worked out systems of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, we would not have been able to deliver foodgrain where it was needed and starvation would have reached unimaginable proportions.

However, despite repeated pleas that this is the time to universalize PDS entitlements, the government has inexplicably and determinedly refused to do so. There has also been a steadfast refusal to adjust and increase the number of NFSA beneficiaries according to the growth in population since 2011 – the base year used to match percentages to the number of beneficiaries to be selected. The malnutrition, starvation and hunger that will spread in the months to come will be as a result of this unwillingness to liberally enhance the distribution of our foodgrain stocks. This is at a time when we have had bumper harvests and procurement, resulting in much more foodgrain than buffer stock requirements. A fair amount of foodgrain is lying exposed and rotting due to stocks overflowing out of storage facilities. Universalizing the PDS, giving take home rations in place of the mid-day meal at

anganwadis, for as long as they are shut, would go a long way in assuring at least foodgrain security to all Indians.

If cities were conceived as an alternative for employment opportunities, the conception has proved unimaginative and fallacious. In many ways the quality of life is better in the village, and it is the poor returns in agriculture, unemployment, and the search for a better income that drives the rural worker to cities. However, most of them are only temporary residents, with deep roots in the villages they came from. When work is brought to a standstill, they have no reason to stay. When they leave in large numbers, a very precarious supply chain will get severely affected, and take a long time to rebuild.

If we want to come out of this crisis with a more secure basis to the quality of life in our cities, we must stop thinking of these workers in merely utilitarian terms, and secure their minimum rights as workers and as residents. So-called 'migrant labour', in particular, are major drivers of growth and production for Indian industry, and are the backbone for economic activity in our cities, dominating the construction, blue-collar, and basic service sectors.

From an administrative standpoint, delivery of entitlements and identity documentation such as the ration card and the Aadhaar card is closely linked to where you are employed and where you live. For these workers who were in the cities, living in 'unauthorized' settlements and slums, getting proof of an address and residence was a nightmare. On returning 'home' to their villages, they are seen as no more than temporary residents. It is an administrative nightmare to immediately secure work under MGNREGA, or ration under the NFSA, and other social entitlements, because each of these come with their own procedures

and budget constraints. The announcements so far and their budgets might sound large but are reduced to an insignificant amount per capita – particularly when, barring MGNREGA, there has hardly been any new/enhanced allocation.

Runaway unemployment has been one of the most damaging outcomes of the lockdown. The economy has faced an enforced shutdown, where restarting production is proving to be a big challenge. Under the circumstances, one of the only measures of employment and income transfer that has provided relief to millions of people has been the MGNREGA. This immediately needs to be expanded by being converted into an open ended employment guarantee ‘on demand’, not restricted by numbers of people in a household who can get work, or the number of days of work they can seek.

An urban employment guarantee is also urgently needed. It would help give people in urban areas fallback employment, as economic activity slowly restarts. The urban employment guarantee can be used to provide much needed services in urban areas.

There is actually an immediate need for a ‘disaster management employment guarantee programme’ to deal with employment and income security issues during the pandemic. This could be a central part of a ‘new deal’ India needs, to respond to the pandemic and the insecurities of its workers, with creativity, energy, synergy and basic security. The cash inflow to people getting work through employment guarantee programmes would also help generate demand and have a multiplier effect on a completely depressed economy and market.

46 **T**he circulatory labour force migrate to cities because of poverty, unemployment, caste violence, landlessness, corporate land grabs and other factors.

Of the 395 million intra-state migrants in India, 62 million are estimated to be Dalits and 31 million Adivasis. On their return they face diluted labour laws and longer working hours. Oppressed already both by class and caste, discrimination against migrant labour, daily wage workers, factory and informal sector workers, is further entrenched by downgrading their rights and protections.

The lockdown laid bare how poorly labour laws had been implemented all these years. Instead of assuring proper implementation and enhanced labour rights, governments like UP, MP, Gujarat and others have passed ordinances and amendments, practically removing even the fig leaf of protection that existed for workers. Similar changes have been made by the Centre and many states on environmental protection. It is crucial that our approach of a welfare state within a constitutional democracy ensures that the private sector and private employers respect the rights of labour, and make sure that the social security needs of people, including access to employment on at least minimum wages, is ensured.

The Urban Employment Guarantee framework could combine proper regulation of conditions of work and living for the vast, unorganized informal sector along with fallback employment at minimum wages. It could also help build a framework of much-needed ‘green work’ in our cities. This would really help transform the plight and multiple crisis being faced by the vast majority of Indians living in cities, turning the challenges brought about by the virus into an opportunity for assuring a basic level of dignity of labour and life to all Indians.

The virus is a reminder that the laws of nature remain fundamental, and our own laws and policies must

understand and respect the strength of these natural forces. We need to become a part of restoring and nurturing the regenerative capacities of nature if we hope to build and rebuild a world that will live in harmony with the human race as an integral part of its natural cycle.

The government imposed the lockdown in the guise of saving lives. For migrant workers the lockdown was turned on its head in terms of its purpose, as physical distance was impossible to maintain, and as a frightened mass of people moved together with the single-minded goal of reaching home – the numbers of positive cases only grew.

The immediate challenge has been to know how extensive the spread of the virus is. Testing is something India could have done much better – even with the limited resources we have. Facilitating testing, and a national policy for testing all potential patients could have been put into place. However this, like many other issues that could have been centrally facilitated, has now been left to the states, and their very limited financial capacities. In the days ahead, testing protocols in rural areas is going to be a challenge, as are standard operating procedures of what to do when there is a need for institutional care.

For all the faith, resources, and partnership the Centre and most state governments placed in the ‘efficiencies’ of the private sector in health, Covid-19 has completely exposed their selfish profit motive, their unwillingness or inability to deliver, and their comprehensive lack of accountability.

Frontline health workers, in both the private and public sector, have taken the brunt of being infected by the virus while performing healthcare duties. Instead of completely meaningless exercises in showering petals on

them for their courage and commitment, we should be responding to their demand for strengthening the public health infrastructure, through better support in terms of personal protective equipment (PPE) kits, enough staff, beds and Covid-19 facilities, oxygen facilities, ventilators, salaries paid on time, and support from communities in terms of following safety protocols and building preventive awareness.

We also need to recognize that large numbers of health facilities are not performing their normal duties on preventable and cureable diseases. For vast numbers of people these are even more life threatening than Covid-19, and in cases like TB can also spread rapidly if not contained. Therefore, Covid-19 needs additional resources and facilities. An already under-resourced and overstretched public health establishment cannot cope with these new demands effectively.

This is the time for India to take some strong comprehensive steps to strengthen our public health system. We need to take a leaf out of the other rights based legislations like employment and food, and seriously and quickly bring into place a right to health law. India has enough resources in the health sector, though the bulk of them are in private hands. Health is one sector where we should think about a form of nationalization, and a national health system with equal access to health for all, and this is the time.

Scientists across the world are working on a vaccine, but to rely on it is like relying on winning a lottery ticket. Instead, we need to build decentralized health awareness and Covid-19 care facilities with the help of local bodies. Kerala has already provided a very fine example of the vital role that panchayats and local communities can play. This approach must be

made a part of our democratic framework in dealing with the pandemic.

The coronavirus pandemic has brought to the fore not only a health crisis on a scale not seen since the Spanish Flu (1918), but also a crisis of democracy. The entrenchment of inequality and enforced non-participation of civil society has helped rampant state-sponsored repression. For India, this is of utmost concern for citizens across all backgrounds, but to even lose the right to speak out is especially devastating for the marginalized.

At the core of this democratic crisis sits unattended health, economic and social issues magnified to impose controls but unaddressed in real terms. The priority of the government has been to seize every opportunity to centralize power and increase the opacity and arbitrariness in governance/decision-making. Even the rhetoric of 'PM Cares' is exposed by the fact that it is a national fund hidden from institutional scrutiny even of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), and a self-proclaimed immunity from the Right to Information (RTI).

This centralized command and control has not substantially managed to curb the spread of the pandemic amongst the workers, nor alleviate the immediate suffering caused by the lockdown. Our constitutional democracy and directive principles of state policy lie buried under the goals of economic growth, the politics of identity and majoritarianism, and the forces of the market. Decentralization and federalism envisaged for participatory self-government and democracy, are the framework against which we should measure our democratic integrity.

A calculating ruling dispensation has used restrictions to Article 19, to ensure that no voice can be raised

in protest. In the land of Gandhi, civil disobedience, public protest, and even hunger strikes are seen as 'violent' modes of public disturbance by the government in power. A series of charitable efforts to feed migrants and those affected by these calamities have come under the scanner for no other reason than the identity of the people so benefited is that of minorities or the poor.

There is madness in our panic reaction to the virus, but there is calculated method in the lockdown, and the appropriation and manipulation of state power. The virus certainly does not discriminate on grounds of class or identity. The fear that has been stoked by governments is directed to feed prejudice and therefore, to usurp and exercise more authoritarian power.

Democracy was, and is still set aside, not just for citizens and workers, but also for elected representatives, and their 'sacrosanct' parliamentary oversight. The state exercised impunity to give itself room to make mistakes through trial and error and repeated executive orders and amendments, while questioning was outlawed. The orders issued by the Government of India had to be strictly followed. Federal structures were sidestepped. It is only when it became clear that the central government actually had no answers and were unwilling or unable to provide the resources needed to act that matters were turned over to the states to do what they could. This left little scope for building a decentralized, synergetic approach for dealing with any issue of governance including the execution of the total lockdown – perhaps the largest ever administrative orchestration in human history.

The states and districts were told to implement orders through the colonial bureaucratic structure of chief secretaries and district collectors. The

complete lack of preparation, consultation, practice, and a constantly changing understanding of the traits of a new ‘virus’, has led to a legacy of a twin national disaster. There is the constant spread of a disobedient virus, and the unprecedented increase in controls and opacity, by a centralized governance framework. The virus has justified the authoritarianism of a lockdown, and the national disaster has allowed the much-used façade of nationalism to be invoked once again to justify fundamental violations of the promises we made to ourselves in the Preamble to the Constitution.

The state has used its concentrated power by restricting mobility and mobilization. These are rights fundamental to democracy and freedom. Transparency is an incidental and intended victim. Enforcing democratic accountability of the state is almost impossible without mobility and the right to protest – affecting millions of workers and other vulnerable groups. The opposition has been neutralized and is unable to function and provide a strong alternative platform.

Adding insult to injury, the central government has appropriated power and is the only one with the capacity to find financial resources, but has shirked its responsibility of providing the poor and vulnerable the most basic necessities, alternative livelihoods, and transport to go home. Those who managed to reach home often-times saw an ill-prepared and underfunded state administration scrambling to figure out systems that would provide relief, ration and livelihood to the influx of people. The central government, for the most part, has ignored the need for consultation with states and civil society in making policy decisions. In the process, we have failed to secure the much-needed informed participation of all in dealing with this challenge.

In a vast country like India, when processes of consultation and decentralization are not respected, we leave ourselves open to a perverted version of self rule. There are reports of villages (and even urban colonies) barricading themselves, and restricting entry – with self-appointed leaders feeding on the fear of the virus – to build prejudice, hostility and exclusion. The Hindutva rhetoric falls on fertile ground. There have been multiple anecdotes of how people won’t buy vegetables and fruits from people with Muslim names, and villages in various areas of Rajasthan have started digging trenches and cordoning themselves off to disallow returning migrants from entering.

This is the exact opposite formula to what we need. This is the time when the central government should be working to provide leadership that pulls together every citizen, provides resources to states and local governments, and helps remove fear and coercion as a means of governance. Covid-19 is not the only crisis we are facing. If every state, every community, every sector were to be respected and treated with dignity, and every ward in the country, at panchayat and urban ward level, were to be involved in a joint campaign of synergy, support and compassion, we might still convert this moment of crisis into one of opportunity.

Unfortunately, the current template for dealing with the crisis leaves no room for that. The days ahead seem bleak for meeting the basic needs of food security, livelihood security, and health security for most citizens. Only a functioning democracy can bring us together to face these challenges. As at many times in history, even the struggle to protect democratic rights and our constitution will have to come from the people, lest we write an obituary for workers and democracy.

Building street communities in the time of a pandemic

MADHU BHUSHAN

The streets emptied themselves out into silos of silence. The giant machines went into anaphylactic shock. The cavernous malls stared into space looking haunted. The city withdrew into a fearful slumber while smaller towns and village continued to spin the daily warp and weft of life with little disruption. The skies burst open with stars and planets that sparkled with barely restrained glee. The air began to breathe. Time it seems ceased to move forward. And instead raced backwards into a future that vanished into uncertainty.

IT was the first few days of the lockdown. For a moment it seemed like the grand march of global capital had actually come to a grinding halt. The gluttonous consumer economy cowered and starved in the face of the world's most powerful terrorist to date – an invisible little virus. One that it seemed had even brought all the

world's religions to their knees. And hopefully humbled the government enough to actually do what they are elected to do. Govern. And not dominate, divide, control or exploit. Either the citizens or the natural resources of the country.

It was like a pause button had been switched on. And humanity, it seemed, had been given one last chance to revive, restore, rejuvenate and reboot itself.

But that was for one glorious moment. In the weeks that followed the announcement of lockdown, the government at the Centre, powered by testosterone, speedily went back to the business of consolidating power; preying on the growing fear and paranoia of the people; stigmatizing the poor, communalizing the virus, criminalizing the affected and impacted in dehumanizing ways; incarcerating all opposition that had reared its head during the anti citizenship protests of December 2019 to March 2020. And, of course, politically profiting from uncertainty and misery.

On the ground, even while the relatively more privileged retreated piously into their homes clapping hands and lighting lamps on the balconies to keep the virus at bay, the poor and the

* This article, drawing upon personal notes and social media posts, emerges from a surreal journey as one of the many volunteers with Naavu Baharateeyaru and Bangalore with Migrants, two of the many networks reaching out to migrant workers and daily wage earners during and after the lockdown in Bangalore, Karnataka.

less privileged scoured the streets for jobs and livelihoods paying little attention to pandemic. 'Hunger will get us before Corona will', was the simple philosophy. As a fallout of the thoughtless and brutal lockdown and in the near total absence of systemic safety nets, the economy went into a tailspin. A myriad livelihoods disappeared leaving millions who live and labour in the shadow economy scrambling around for basic food and survival.

And in the meantime from amidst this fear and crisis appeared an unexpected sight. That of the marching migrants who forcefully drew attention to their presence on the ghostly streets and highways of the metropolises.

Emerging silently from its underbelly, the city it appeared was purging itself off those who had laboured to construct its infrastructure, brick by brick, girder by girder. Those who had melded anonymously into a space they had made their temporary home. And when they appeared on the streets – the blank faced young men with their colourful plastic covers containing their precious identity papers and their bulging knapsacks, or anxious families with children slung across their shoulders pulling all their worldly goods packed into a plastic bucket or sack, something fundamentally shifted. In public consciousness and conscience. Even if not in public policy and our politics.

Locally, in the state, the administration fumbled around for appropriate ways to respond to the unfurling economic, humanitarian and health crisis and in the process unexpectedly reached out to civil society to come on board, including trade unions, citizen groups, women's and human rights groups with whom in normal peace times, it is at war. Others too came out to help including RWAs (Resident Welfare Associations), ordinary citi-

zens whether slum dwellers or apartment residents, workers and management, rotary and lions clubs, retired bank officers and housewives, school teachers and students, fashion designers and lawyers, actors and auto drivers, private philanthropies and social workers, sex workers and trans people, people of faith and radical activists of non-faith. All came together and flowed into a river of diverse volunteers working feverishly on the ground and online to reach out to those workers on the move paralyzed by the lockdown. Something about the migrant moved them.

It was a humanitarian response to a humanitarian crisis, both equally of epic proportions. And quite unlike any response seen in times of other humanitarian disasters, whether natural or man-made. Not devoid of contradictions and painful paradoxes and yet strangely hopeful even in the midst of extreme despair and dehumanization. For this time both the despair and hope revolved around three unlikely stories, each in their own ways the story of the devalued, the demonized and the discarded 'other' of global capital on the one hand, and a majoritarian nationalism on the other. One of course the story of the migrant and the others, that of the Muslim and the local.

For far away from the macro world and imagination where the Game of Thrones continued to be played, on the ground, on the streets, in shrunken micro worlds, broken and divided communities began re-weaving smaller webs of life, solidarity and interconnectedness.

And these webs proved to be cussed and resilient even against persisting xenophobia, Islamophobia, and globalized greed. For it was the 'other' – the migrant, the Muslim and the local that came together in unexpected camaraderie to fight back in strange

and unexpected ways. Restoring in the process some equilibrium and hope of surviving a pandemic that on the streets exposed social and political fault lines as much as it strengthened a common humanity forged in the fires of human solidarity. One day at a time. One meal at a time. One quarrel at a time. One story at a time.

Rejaul, West Bengal, 15 April 2020: *'Vaiya, hamlok West Bengal ka rehene bale he. Bangalore me kam ki sil sile me ayethe. lekin lockdown ki bajase pichle 37 din se atak gayahu. ham logo ke pas jitni paise thi sob khatam ho gaya vai. sir ek bakt ka khana nasip hota he vaiya. please kuch kijiye vaiya hamlok bari mushibad me hu. agar aplok kuch kar sake to please kuch kijiye. ham 2 log he vaiya.'*

'Brother, we are from West Bengal. We came to Bangalore in search of a job. Because of the lockdown for the past 37 days we are stuck. Whatever money we had it is over. There may be just one more meal in our fate. Please do something we are in great distress. If you can please help. There are two of us.'

A desperate message that came through WhatsApp from Rejaul, a young 18-19 year old migrant who had arrived in Bangalore barely a couple of days before the lockdown was imposed.

When asked if he could at least find his way to a ration shop so that provisions could be organized, he says that he is scared. That one of the boys staying next door tried going out and was beaten back by the police. 'Humko dar hai; hum bahut pareshan hai.' He remembers every single day of the lockdown. To the day. In a place he is not even able to describe. Or give directions to.

There is no official record of the number of migrant workers in the

country. Ironically enough perhaps the only statistics emerging are from records maintained by state governments about the number of migrant workers sent back to their home states through free Shramik trains organized after an extended period of denial by the central government about their plight. According to the Centre, 60 lakh migrants took 4,450 Shramik specials to reach their home states. The state of Karnataka is estimated to have sent back more than four lakh migrant workers in over 300 trains between the months of May and July 2020, after the lifting of the lockdown. Thanks to the pandemic, the migrants on the move could be counted. And seen. For till then they were unseen and unheard – dwelling in the shadows of cities, towns and even villages where everybody knows everybody. As Srikant, a Hakki Pikki tribal, a diehard nomad himself but now living a more settled life in Bannerghatta, 20 kms outside Bangalore city said: ‘It was only during the lockdown that we came to know that so many Hindi people are living amidst us.’

The lockdown pushed them out from the shadows and anonymity. Hundreds of migrant workers like Rejaul started desperately reaching out for help, both through the dysfunctional official helplines and the overstretched unofficial helplines that the personal phones of scores of volunteers became. Workers being driven out from their villages and towns by collapsing agrarian economies or driven by the aspiration to make a better life in a city that promises opportunities and mobility.

As more and more migrants began breaking out of their isolation and reaching for help, what became clear was that The Migrant could not be reduced to one homogenous identity – that of a Hindi, North Indian, male cons-

truction worker. As envisaged even by the government that initially released funds for their welfare through the State Construction Workers Board, which most could not access since they were neither construction workers nor registered in the states to which they had migrated for work. The workers not only came from, but also occupied multiple worlds which the official discourse could neither comprehend nor accommodate.

On the one hand were individual migrant workers like Rejaul who found themselves totally lost in the city. Those who overnight lost their earnings, were in danger of losing the roof over their heads after being evicted by landlords and had totally lost whatever little was left of their dignity. Having little or no money left after sending their earnings back to their villages many had no access even to food. Some who called had not eaten a proper meal for three to four days and were surviving on water and biscuits. They were afraid of even going out to get fresh food being distributed by the trade unions since the police were beating them back into their rooms. If lucky, they got some rations from some good Samaritans in the neighbourhood and across the city.

On the other hand were the anonymous migrant workers – hundreds of who are locked up like slave labour in invisible labour camps, and caught within a toxic contractor nexus that never enabled them to have a voice or a face. As for instance garment workers and metro workers. The report ‘Behind the Pillars of the Metro’ brought out by a local media group called Maraa, at the height of the lockdown, perhaps for the first time brought to public attention the plight of Bangalore Metro workers who are typical of this new form of indentured labour that no Bonded Labour Act can apply to.

‘While builders, engineers, supervisors are hired directly by the construction company, cheap labour is procured through a complex web of contractors. This makes it extremely difficult for the state or public to access the workers directly, making way for several labour violations. Safety conditions for workers have been neglected, which has resulted in several deaths on site the most recent deaths reported on March 4th, 2020. The workers work precariously on site without safety gear or supervision. None of the workers are registered with any trade union or the labour department. Over the last decade, the Metro workers that have passed the city, building the Metro, would easily be over one lakh workers.’

Between the closed world of indentured labour, like the Metro workers and the lost individual world of Rejaul, lies the diverse and multiple worlds of the migrant. Who not only do construction work on flyovers, roads and buildings as masons, carpenters, electricians, painters, and plumbers, but also do the finest of embroidery for chic boutiques and stitch the most stylish kurtas and shirts in the narrow bylanes of Shivajinagar; Who do masterchef style cooking in swanky food courts in IT parks, and make idlis on roadside restaurants on Mosque Road and sell crunchy golgappas in smaller layouts. Who thread eyebrows and wax legs in beauty parlours in downtown Brigade Road, and also drive autos and repair bikes in local neighbourhoods. Who work in the garment industry and as carpenter, electricians and plumbers and sell clothes on their cycles on the streets. Who play the guitar, belting out the gospel or swing to the raunchy beat of a Bhojpuri song. Who speak Bengali, Marwari, Manipuri, Assamese, Oriya, Urdu and languages and dialects per-

haps we don't even know the names of. Who live not only on the outskirts of the city in tin sheds and huts but also in remote villages and in the heart of old cities.

They are Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Tribal and Dalit. Some are god-fearing; some god cursing. Some are Modi bhakts. Some are trenchant government critics. They are a reminder of the messy multiverse that is India. And most important, they are a reminder that home for most of India still survives in the village or small town. The home that they all universally wanted to go back to, rejecting the world that they realized, at least for the moment, had sold them broken dreams and illusory aspirations.

Harischandra, UP; 16 April 2020: *'Why should we stay on here... what is left for us here? We have our small field back home and we can survive by eating what we grow. We came out to the city to earn money. We came here to work. But now we neither have work nor money. Nor dignity. We are not even allowed to go out. Please do something and just send us back home. Hamein ghar jaana hai.'*

The world had not delivered. It was time to go back home where they would at least find some food to sustain their bodies and the familiarity of kinship to sustain their souls.

In a strange and twisted way, the pandemic that put up spatial barriers between people gave the migrant a persona and a presence. The worker emerged not just as an anonymous cog in the wheel. But a living, breathing and complex human being whose dreams could not be reduced to the deracinated desires of an antiseptic, aspirational economy and whose sweat and labour could no longer be ignored either by the state or the public.

For over the months, as the city emptied itself of the migrants, it seemed to have lost a palpable part of itself. And soon enough the abandoned projects and industries began feeling the need for 'labour' like never before. They were being wooed back by those same exploitative forces that had earlier harassed them with non-payment for months, pushed them to barely survive in abysmal living and working conditions and summarily discarded them during the lockdown. Stories now are being heard of how contractors and employers are enticing the migrants back with airfares, higher wages and better working conditions.

The tragedy is that even as the loss of labour was being felt, the central government, in the name of kick-starting the economy, introduced labour reforms that all but legitimize new forms of slavery where workers, with increased working hours, decreased wages, and little or no right to unionize, lose all access to collective bargaining which should be at the heart of any healthy economic system. And surprisingly enough this move has been protested not only by trade unions but also corporates like Azim Premji and Ratan Tata.

As Azim Premji said: 'Diluting these already lax laws will not boost economic activity, it will only exacerbate the conditions of the low wage earners and the poor. Such measures tend to pit workers and businesses against each other. This is a false choice. We need only look at the past few weeks of experience, the unjust treatment of migrant labour vitiated the social contract between business and labour. This triggered the mass reverse migration of labour, undermining businesses. Thus, such measures are not only unjust but also dysfunctional. The interests of workers and businesses are deeply aligned, particularly in times of unprecedented economic crisis.'

One hopes that when the world awakens from the virus, the lessons of the pandemic will not be forgotten – either by the migrants or the solidarity networks built up around the migrant. And new forms of resistance will emerge, central to which will not be the identity of the worker as an atomized and economized unit of production and consumption, but an expansive and inclusive notion of 'labour' as being central to a sustainable economy and world.

And Basavanna's radical philosophy of *Kayakave Kailasa* or Work is Worship, becomes not just a simplistic dictum but a transformative political philosophy that dignifies and values the worker as much as her work.

Nizamuddin, Orissa, 19 April 2020: *He was one of 10 workers from Orissa holed up in Ashoknagar. Three couples with two children and four bachelors. They all are cooks working in small hotels. Their owners have abandoned them. And today they are struggling to get food to survive with some semblance of dignity. It just needed one question for the floodgates to open and the words to come tumbling out in a torrent. 'How are you managing to survive?' 'Actually, my friends are saying let us stop asking for food and rations. Once what we have gets over it is more dignified if we just die. Yes, people come and take our names and numbers and go. But we never hear back from them. We must have just become another number and name to be recorded in their registers. You too might just talk and go and we will never see you again.'*

'Do you know now there is more hate in this world than love? People don't want to talk to us. They don't want to even buy vegetables

from us. Why have people lost the capacity to think for themselves? Moorkhon ka majority ban gaya hai. It is like the majority has become mindless. When will people learn that the politicians to keep their seats are spreading all this hate? Everything has become about Hindu and Muslim. When will people learn that we all depend on each other and help each other out. The government has no intention of listening to and thinking of the poor when they are making all their plans.'

Nizamuddin was not merely a migrant or a worker, but also a philosopher and a political analyst with lots to talk about—especially since he was also Muslim. And if over the last months it was the invisible migrant who became visible in the labour landscape, it was the much demonized Muslim who became a heroic saviour in the humanitarian landscape. And the reasons are not hard to trace.

Not even six months back a great battle was on in the country and in our own state and city. A battle that many said was for the soul of India, since it was against the changes in the citizenship law that marked a shift in the secular character of the Constitution. And the Muslim community, particularly the women, were at the forefront of this battle along with every thinking and feeling citizen regardless of the faith or ideology they belonged to.

The many Shaheen Baghs that flowered across the country showed that as a people they were refusing to be systematically written out of its history, destroyed in its present and weeded out of its future. And as women they were refusing to be the mascots of either a patronizing hypermasculinized nationalism or a protective macho fundamentalism. Which is why perhaps the state which till last year was claim-

ing to protect the poor Muslim women from bigamous husbands through criminalizing the practice of Triple Talaq, this year at the height of the pandemic started to punish young women from the community who had dared to cross the lakshman rekha of political dissent by incarcerating all those who had been at the forefront of the anti-citizenship struggles.

It is not a coincidence that all those who came out onto the streets to lay claims to being an integral part of this country also stayed back on the abandoned streets to become part of yet another battle. This time they were at the heart of the humanitarian battle to reach out to the economic other through well organized networks from within the community, who with relentless generosity offered their skills, commitment and financial resources as part of the efforts of the state and civil society. This was not easy.

For at the national level, the project of communalizing the virus had been achieved almost at the very beginning of the pandemic. A toxic media deliberately whipped up the Tablighi incident, which ensured that in the public imagination Muslims became the primary carriers of the virus, defying every scientific and rational understanding of the disease. Locally, Hindutva networks of relief, by being agenda and not response driven, began to unleash a subtle and not so subtle campaign against Muslim relief workers, building on existing fears and paranoia about the spread of the virus. And despite the fact that the unholy virus had manifested itself in every holy space from Puri Jagannath to Tirupathi where scores of people have tested positive, the toxic truth of the 'Tablighi virus' totally poisoned public perceptions.

There were even instances in which workers from states like UP

refused to accept and eat food brought to them by a Muslim relief worker once again bringing home the fact that workers too cannot be organized merely on the basis of their economic identities, but as products of their cultural contexts which are getting highly communalized.

April 5, 2020: *Gulab is a volunteer with Swaraj Abhiyan and Naavu Bharateeyaru (Hum Bharat ke Log), who had endeared himself with his hard work and cheerful temperament to all those volunteers and workers he had connected with during the relief operations. He was on the road 24 hours a days, zipping across the city on his bike laden with rations and other relief material, come rain or sunshine.*

One night Gulab had gone to the edge of the city to deliver food to a desperate group of workers. Some local people from the community refusing the food sent back a message to the online relief worker they were coordinating with on the phone saying, 'please don't send jihadis to our areas'. When this went around in the group, some of us expressed our outrage. 'So angry and upset about what happened with you today Gulab...' His response was typical: 'Fine yaar, I don't really care' ... (with a smiley) ... I'm used to it.'

'That is your good nature and generosity of spirit Gulab! But please know that we are all in this fight together to save this country from this kind of bigotry and hate...' And Gulab replies with another smiley: 'Yes I like the way we NB (Naavu Bharateeyaru) work.'

But the story does have an unexpected twist. A month later, Gulab receives a message from another Hindu group saying that there was a poor pujari family in dire need of

rations, and asked if he could help. Gulab accepts readily, but wary of the reception he could get, he sends a message to the family saying that he is a Muslim and would they be ready to accept relief from him. They send a message back saying humanity is one, and how could they even think of saying no to somebody willing to help them.

And this incident followed quick on the heels of another one, in another area, where another relief worker Zarine Taj, her son, and members of her family were distributing rations. They were stopped and harassed by some local Hindutva workers who said: 'We don't want Muslims here... go and help your own communities', and then proceeded to complain to the police saying that the food and provisions given by Muslims should be checked. The local police took a strong view of this and told the volunteers to carry on with their work, even offering them protection. Despite this the volunteer and other members of her family, including son, were beaten up by the goons. But spunky Zareen Taj this time filed a formal complaint. Now undeterred, she continues to go around to vulnerable communities ensuring that they have food and rations. And nobody has dared stop her.

The conversations on nationalism, identity, secularism, faith, gender and sexuality that were evoked during the anti-CAA protests that so many of us were part of, have flowed seamlessly into the humanitarian work and are reflective of the comfortably confused common humanity we are all a part of. A vasudhaiva kutumbakam that the current dispensation is systematically dismantling in its self-defeating quest to build a Hindu Rashtra with no clue about the culture it has been born into and destroying.

As Basavanna prays with unerring wisdom to his Lord:

'Don't make me keep questioning the other... who is s/he, who is s/he. May I always feel s/he is our own, s/he is our own
Koodalasangama deva, make me feel that I am a child of your house.'

April 4, 2020: *Life it seems will never be the same again since 22 March. Yes, perhaps life as we know it. But not perhaps life as it is meant to be. Relief, respite, reconstruction seem impossible in these surreal times... and yet...*

#Chandar, a young nomadic Hakki Pikki calls to offer the ragi they have grown for anybody who is in greater need than them. 'Finally it seems that we will have to go back to the land and be sustained by the food we will grow to eat. We will have go back to the lakes to draw our water and drink. Thanks to the land we are on we have at least grown ragi to last us for the year and we can stay at home and not go hungry.'

#Chandrashri from Sadhana Mahila Sangha, the sex workers collective, worried about her women, sitting through the night and painfully typing out on the borrowed computer a list of the most vulnerable – women living on and off the streets, positive women needing ART and unable to go to hospital, single women single-handedly supporting large families – not knowing when their next meal is going to come from.

#People of conscience from small neighbourhoods like my own Cooke Town, reaching out to migrant workers living and working around them, finding out about their contractors, employers and payments and assisting them with buying and delivering provisions.

The pandemic, through imposing the diktat of social or physical distanc-

ing, on the one hand legitimized the worst forms of caste and gender discrimination in our society. But on the other, through limiting physical movement, it forced people to strengthen new forms of the local. A local that redesigned itself around an ethic of care and political solidarity; an economy of subsistence and sustainability; an ecology of mutual interdependence and the politics of democratic decentralization.

When the more privileged communities came out of the safety and security of their homes to reach out to their neighbour, who was the migrant construction worker, many this time did not deploy just their money, technology and expertise in an exercise of benevolent power. They pushed for more structural changes conscious of their own privilege within the system. They approached the local administrations to hold them accountable to extend relief that was the right of the dispossessed working class. They also came out on to the streets to protest when the Shramik trains were stopped by the state government at the insistence of the builder lobby which wanted captive labour they could use and abuse. They also came out to protest in small groups within their localities when the young students and women in Delhi who had protested the citizenship bill some months earlier, were being incarcerated under the draconian UAPA Act that criminalizes all forms of dissent.

When members of the less privileged communities like Chandar and Chandrashri came out to extend their solidarity in terms of sharing either their produce or their own labour with those who they felt were suffering more than them, they reminded us that the notion of solidarity is not just the luxury of the privileged classes but also the survival instinct of the not so privi-

leged. That the notion of subsistence grounding the 'economy of the poor' can be rooted in notions of production and consumption based on the more holistic economy of sustainability and not be reduced to the devalued and discarded byproduct of excessive consumption which grounds the 'economy of the rich'.

Unlikely alliances began to form across barriers of state and civil society, across ideological and political divides, and across diverse constituents of civil society ranging from faith based groups, charity organizations, corporate philanthropies, rights based groups and unions that were forced to work together despite and through the clashes and contradictions of class, caste, communities and state power. A new, or perhaps old ecology of mutual interdependence tentatively (re)surfaced around ideas of solidarity that appeared to defy both feudal notions of charity that consolidates cultural capital and new age corporate social responsibility that legitimizes economic capital.

Like local neighbourhood, the 'mustering centres' to which the migrant workers gathered in the hundreds and thousands while they waited for the trains to take them home, became another of the micro sites of this expansive notion of solidarity, where the ritual of sharing and caring played out in interesting ways.

All kinds of people stream in through the day. A group of women who have collected money from their neighbourhood, respectfully put it into covers that they then distribute to workers going to Assam. Some of the workers come and take charge of piles of clothes that people have sent to be distributed. They sort through and share those that are respectfully new while discarding with dignity those old ones donated with contempt. People

from the gurdwara quietly set up tables full of food, and without any fuss distribute it to all there and pack up and melt away. A relief group of lawyers that has tirelessly been packing food and water for the migrants to carry with them on the journey, set up a public address system and start an impromptu entertainment programme which breaks the palpable anxiety and tension of the waiting workers. An old man emerges from the crowd and starts to dance while a young man with an extraordinary Rafi-like voice sings – both enthrall the crowd. Even the space that could be totally dehumanizing hums with resilient dignity.

And all this while behind the scenes unions, lawyers and activists are fighting on the virtual corridors of power within the government and the courts to obtain progressive orders, ensuring for the workers and the urban poor their right to life, dignity, food, mobility.

Senior officers who normally remain inaccessible in their citadels of bureaucratic power, suddenly became relatively more accessible to the ordinary citizen. They were actually available at the other end of the phone – if not personally at least through WhatsApp. And this was not only for pesky activists but also desperate workers who wanted to know where their trains were, and if they could get on.

Even the police who were brutal and violent in the beginning months of the lockdown attempt to repair and rebuild their relationship with the workers with a more protective and empathetic bond. 'I feel sorry for them,' said a woman constable who was on guard there from morning to night. 'They too are scared and want to go back home. Look at my plight. I am sitting here the whole day and when I go home, I cannot even go near my children. I just go home to have a bath

and sleep away from the family. My niece wants to know why aunty, who used to come home and give me a hug, has no love for me now.' It was as though the pandemic had created conditions within which power got diffused and partially tamed to hold itself accountable in unexpected, if more humane, ways.

An epilogue: It is strange. On the streets adding to the continuing narratives of our multiple 'others', are other ghosts from the past who also refuse to leave – Gandhi goes on about how the earth has enough for everybody's need but not everybody's greed, while Marx critically deconstructs the unjust structures of class, and Ambedkar dismantles the cultures of caste and indignity. The unexpected visitors are Jane Jacob, the intrepid urbanist and activist from US, and Hannah Arendt the philosopher who fled Germany and Fascism in 1933. The former argues for a community based approach to city living and building neighbourhoods in which all local residents get more intimately invested. Hannah Arendt while warning us about the origins of a totalitarian politics urges us to find spaces of freedom, and freedom from tyranny, in active citizenship civic engagement and collective deliberation about all matters affecting the political community. And amidst all this one senses the ceaseless movement of the Jangama who strives for liberation and emancipation through a devotion to his/her livelihood.

The cacophony continues. At the macro level it seems the pandemic has taught no lessons. Among other architectures of power being reconstructed, labour reforms, the proposed amendments in the Environment Impact Assessment Act, and the relentless use of the authoritarian UAPA against activists and students, does not portend well either for labour, the 'minorities'

or a sustainable ecology of mutual interdependence.

At this moment when it seems that the future is being swallowed up, one wonders what will prevail in a post pandemic world. Hubris, arrogance of power and entitlement? Or a more expansive if humble narrative of resistance nourished by the smaller stories of resilient human solidarities that keep coming back like cobwebs refusing to be swept away into the dustbins of time.

Postscript: Abdul, West Bengal, 28 July 2020: *Abdul has been incessantly calling over the last weeks, ever since he decided to go back to his home and village in Malda, West Bengal. Earlier it was to enquire about the timings of the Shramik trains on behalf of his friends. When my colleague asked him why he was not going, he said he was waiting to be paid his wages to take back home. He was so excited when he finally boarded the train to leave Bangalore that from the moment he got his berth (I am sitting on my seat) till he gets down (Malda is only few minutes away), there is a blow by blow account of the journey.*

Once he reaches home he calls and makes his children speak and sends photographs of his family and house of tin sheets and tiles that teeter over the river flowing behind the house. 'The river has flooded our fields and we could not grow anything he says.' He invites us to his village and promises to feed us with the famous sweet mangoes from Malda. His future plans include going to Thailand where he has been offered a job as a cable layer. In the message he sends this morning he is upbeat: 'Good morning, this is the house photo, this is my family. I bought it to make it home, see, madam, if I go to Thailand, maybe I will make a good house. God willing.'

The virus willing, I add silently.

Masked horizons: reflections on death and dying

DEEPTI SACHDEV

AN eerie apparition seems to be closing in on us. More and more instances of those dying are becoming proximal.

We wait with bated breath, occupying our bodies tenuously, like tenants, migrants, forever under the threat of eviction. The news on television relays numbers and statistics. This seems to be the language of global preference, a language desperately trying to communicate the gravitas of what we, as a modern civilization, are confronted with. The screen telescopes the tragedy right into the heart of our room. There are images of hospitals that have run out of beds, pavements that are littered with sickness, and corpses that no one wishes to touch. Bodies, bereft of life, abound in these images. Sick, confused, confined, displaced, with nowhere to go. As the virus travels and multiplies manifold, the pandemic leaves the body without destination.

In this article, I want to open up some reflections on death and dying that seem to flood human conscious-

ness in the contemporary moment. A preoccupation with death and its meaning is not new. Through time immemorial, it has been an inexhaustible subject of human curiosity, be it in philosophical contemplation, in religious doctrine, or in scientific enquiry. It constitutes an individual's deepest dread and deepest enigma; a fact of which we are all cognitively aware, and yet live in emotional oblivion.

Sudhir Kakar, the eminent psychoanalyst 'from the Indian terroir'¹ writes, 'As far as the unimaginability of death is concerned, there is little difference between Yudhishtira's north India of 600 bce, the time of the Mahabharata, and central Europe of the early 20th century where Freud writes: "It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that

1. Anup Dhar and Anurag Mishra, *Psychoanalysis from the Indian Terroir: Emerging Themes in Culture, Family, and Childhood*. Lexington Books, Lanham, Maryland, 2018.

we are in fact still present as spectators... (Psychoanalysis asserts) that at bottom no one believes in his own death, or, to put the same thing in another way, that in the unconscious, every one of us is convinced of his own immortality".²

Jacques Lacan, the French psychoanalyst widely considered as the enfant terrible of psychoanalysis, asserted that death belongs in/to the realm of faith: 'You are right to believe you will die.' For him, it is death that makes life bearable, it is death that sustains life. Writing in the ancient period in Classical Greece, Plato called Philosophy the practice of death, while the English poet, John Keats, who died in 1821 at the age of 25 from tuberculosis, would advise that the affirmation of life derives from its very fragility and transitoriness.

Whatever be one's persuasion, the arrival of the consciousness of death in one's life is often decisive in ushering a lasting psychological reorientation. My contention in this write-up is to approach the imagery of death and the fears around it present in the current consciousness, and to ask what they inform us of. What are the images of death that are surfacing during the coronavirus pandemic? In selecting a few of these images, neither exhaustively, nor with exactitude, I wonder what are the possible intimations they bring about in our attitude towards dying, its inevitability and its finitude? For me, this predilection, what I call here an attitude, derives from a messy amalgam of having grown up in a spiritual non-religious family, a secular education, a training in psychoanalysis and social anthropology, and a turn to my own experience—choices and accidents — which bestow the insights that I attempt to share and the limits thereof.

2. Sudhir Kakar, *Death and Dying*. Viking, Penguin Books India, 2014.

As a student of psychoanalysis and psychology, the epistemic lineage of the word 'psyche' is part of the intellectual inheritance bequeathed to me. This nonetheless rests in close proximity with my worldview as that of someone born at the close of the twentieth century, for who the soul is a metaphysical construction, long banished from the assumptions of modern secular science that has shaped my academics and modern medicine that has shaped my notions of life and health. This is a search for reconciliation.

It is here, within this landscape of opposites, now dotted with the covid virus, that a dilemma appears. The clearing made by the winds of modern secularism, freeing us from the shackles of a prescriptive religiosity, stands as a parched land where we struggle to recover the meaning and morality of death. Where lies the horizon of living and dying? Where lies it now? Does it meet at the masks we wear? And does it stop there?

Like many people these days, over the past few weeks, I have come to avoid watching the news. The television screen has been abuzz with statistics from across the globe—numbers, graphs, diagrams, models—a shrillness of sound that the mind slowly dulls into a distant blur. I am reminded of Derrida's words: Monsters cannot be announced. There is what could only be described as a halting of life in an unreal oscillation between routine and bewilderment. I recognize this psychological numbness for what I have read it suggests — an emotional freezing, a response to the onslaught of panic, psychologically protective in the immediacy of the here-and-now, yet ultimately a defence that works by considerably abridging our consciousness of the full spectrum of what it means to be alive.

The avoidance takes effort. There is the inexorable pull in the other direction that makes it hard to be away from the screen. Perhaps a lacanian jouissance that is at work to convert the formlessness of dread into contours of anxiety. The language of numbers seeks to lend a grammar to the unnameable, which tosses us between terror and indifference. The psychoanalyst Jeanne Wolff Bernstein suggests that what is overwhelming and unimaginable can initially be captured only in numbers and 'facts'. It is only later that it is 'able to find a hold in a changed language afterwards, which not only registers, informs and excites, but also offers a symbolic space in which the emotional losses can take shape and resonate.'³

Bernstein notes with perspicacity how several of Freud's theoretical formulations including his work on mourning and melancholia, written under the shadow of the Spanish Flu pandemic in 1918, to which he loses his daughter, differ markedly in mood, tone and content from the letters to his friends and loved ones where the inconsolability of his long enduring grief is more readily expressed. Freud, the scientist, attempts to look at loss dispassionately and distinguish, as a diagnostician would, between a mourning that is healthy and one that is ongoing and, thus, pathological — what his theory calls melancholia. However, it is in his personal letters that we encounter Freud as the devastated father and grandfather, struggling to find an adequate articulation of his pain and feelings of sorrow.

In 1929, writing to Ludwig Binswanger, on the day that would

3. Jeanne Wolff Bernstein, *The Spanish Flu, Covid 19 and Sigmund Freud: What Can We Learn from History*, 2020. <https://www.freud-museum.at/en/news/the-spanish-flu-covid-19-and-sigmund-freud.htm>

have been his daughter Sophie's 36th birthday, Freud remarks: 'Although you know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else... And actually this is how it should be. It's the only way of perpetuating that love which we don't want to relinquish. (...)'⁴

Against the extant widespread chaos of the pandemic, the last few months have stood witness to various other catastrophic events from cyclones, to earthquakes, locust invasions, oil spills, the horrific loss of home and lives of workers, and an economic collapse, each heralding a new doom. Survival amidst this cataclysm has meant a normalizing of the apocalyptic, a survival between the disciplined order of statistics and the unruly register of rumour.

In his article on 'Terminality', Abou Farman reflects on the condition of becoming terminal, through his personal experience of caretaking for his wife in the last stage of her illness – a cancer that has metastasized – the medical prognosis for which establishes the body as being beyond the scope of cure. He uses the condition of 'becoming terminal' as an ontological position to describe the secular body in a secular time and space, without recourse to an imagination of transcendence, of future, of possibility for building, both within life, as well as in the after-life.

Medical practice reinscribes life, death, and future, to the saturated discourse of numbers, of 'time left', a time which is not the phenomenological time

of being, or of being-in-waiting, but a time that is declarative, subject to calculation and precision. This in turn configures the experience of the dying person as one that seems governed by an anxious body's ticking countdown. '(It is) not the fact or experience of disease, pain, and so on, as much as the experience of a body from which all promise, all hope, all potential has been withdrawn; it is that which informs the pain itself, which lends to itself a particular kind of meaning to the pain.'⁵ We are urged to ask, within this construction of terminality, how is one to rediscover the sociality and the moral meaning of death and dying.

Much of Farman's meditation on terminality seems extendable to an analysis of our own existential predicament during the coronavirus pandemic. Sickness and death is rampant. It comes to us in the distant, normalizing mode of statistics carrying an air of certitude, coherence, and precision, but emptied of the symbolic resonance that enables a private knowing and meaning-making. How well can the finitude of large numbers substitute the human quest for infinity and eternity that the desouled secular body must come to terms with?

The 'terminal body' that Farman outlines exists in the realm of the obscene vulnerability of bare life and bare death: the body without soul. The terminal body of Covid-19 transmits this condition of 'withoutness' to the body itself. The body is housed with risk. It is not just a vulnerable body, it is also a dangerous body, a zone of contagion. For those unable to derive consolation from the religious and cultural imaginations of an after-life, the soul had long been banished from imagination for its immateriality. Now

it is materiality that places the body at risk. With physical distancing becoming the new norm, circles of social proximity and withdrawal get redrawn as touch becomes the new villain. Disease, distance and desouling leave us frightened and imprisoned in our own skin.

Last month, I woke up one uneventful morning to a message on my phone informing me that an old friend of mine had passed away. I read the message again, then again. I sat down, read it slowly. I thought of the farewell gift I had recently received from my mentor Anupda and remembered the words 'dead pigeon'. The message fell at my feet like a dead pigeon. Or perhaps I fell. Uneasy, fugue-like, my feet shuffled to the terrace, hands mechanically finished their task; for a while a frenzy of desultory activity consumed me. I had to remind myself to sit. My fingers trembled, as I searched desperately in my inbox for older emails, pictures, something, anything that could wade through this cold vapour of emotional fog and offer me something to hold, something tangible, a body to my thoughts, in my hands, in my mind, in my memory. In my crazed desperation, I recalled we used to play scrabble on facebook. There must be a profile there. Nothing. There is no trace. The pain in my chest continued to swell.

Why did I not keep in touch?

The sharpness of the loneliness in the days that followed surprised me. My closest friend, who also lives down the same lane as I, decided to bring over her daughter, one and a half year old, who I hadn't seen in more than two months. We stood on opposite sides of the iron gate outside my house. Separated by iron bars, like in a prison. The little one wore a mask just like the rest of us. She held out her arms, wanting to come to me. I hesitated, the futility of the gesture piercing through me, yet

4. Ernst Freud, *Letters of Sigmund Freud* (selected and edited by Ernst Freud 1873-1939). Dover Publications, New York, 1960, p. 386.

5. Abou Farman, 'Terminality', *Social Text* 35(2(131)), 2017, pp. 93-118. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-3820569>

I held out my arms in turn, continuing to stand where I was.

We all remained where we were. This moment is frozen. We are all frozen. Our fingers dance in the air thawing the moment. The yearning to be held hangs heavy. She waits, looks confused, and then wears an expression that is almost prosaic. To our relief (which will later become an anguish that is cutting) she doesn't protest too much. I find myself compelled to make some silly joke about how I stink, which is why she must not come close to me. She looks on, some distraction sets in and she is confused again. (I'll look back at this scene and marvel at my friend's ordinary courage). She has to be lured away back home with the promise of chocolate waiting for her.

When was the last time I held her?

I had to be thankful for technology when I learnt that the prayer meeting for my friend was being organized over zoom. Family and friends congregated in this virtual space, waiting to be let in, as zoom beeped messages about the upper limit of users that could be admitted in. The rite for offering condolences resembled a privilege that had to be earned. (Now as I write this, I learn of people having to wait for several days at cremation grounds and burial places that are overwhelmed with death. There is no space for any of the customary rituals of mourning through which those surviving ordinarily find some semblance of solace and relief for their pain.)

Trapped behind our own screens, unable to offer or receive a hug, to wipe off a tear, to break down on a comforting shoulder, what decent way could there be to find consolation for the grief that had brought us together. Voices spoke, adrift in echoes, as faceless words seem to float away into the distance. That is how we entered this space for mourning, a dematerialized

waiting room in which we were alone together, in a different mythic time, held by our love for him, a love that may or not reach him in the cosmos.

Phillipe Ariès, the French medievalist and historian of family and childhood writes about *The Ars Moriendi*, the Art of Dying that describes the transition from living to dying which entailed preparing the soul for transition through the acknowledgment of the advent of death.⁶ The *Ars Moriendi* were a set of Latin texts written in the 15th century in the context of the Black Death pandemic, the term 'art' suggesting a skill or a method through which specific knowledge could be applied to practical life situations.

The metaphysical assumption underlying *Ars Moriendi* was that the fate of the individual in eternity was tied to the state of the soul as it left the body. The deathbed was thus the site for repentance for the sins one had committed, the final opportunity to ask for forgiveness, and to resist the temptations that the devil brought along to entice the soul. In this last hour, the physician expert was to withdraw, as the dying person, in close consultation with the family and the clergy, took over himself the role of presiding over the rituals, prayers and preparations for this journey.

Modern notions of what constitutes a good death have carried over some of these old attitudes of how to die well. These include a stance of reflectiveness and wisdom as one reviews the life one has lived, an attitude of acceptance and fortitude to make the most of now, and dying at home surrounded by loved ones. We all live in the hope for this good death. It is a belief that our own death will be

banal, in the sense that it would be 'timely' – in other words, one that comes from old age, natural causes, and largely without too much pain or suffering. When a death happens that is not in accordance with the cultural ideals of what constitutes a good death, our external social categories of membership in the world complicate the internal and deeply personal way of working through one's grief.⁷

Silences in the language of the social body cannot be articulated in the body of non-social language. Psychoanalysis suggests that herein lies a breakdown of symbols that is profoundly traumatic and painfully alienating. In the absence of symbolic structures that enable and sanction survival and the imageries of renewal, loss becomes absolute and insurmountable.

None of the culturally valued ideals of good death are available for the agonizing crisis that the covid illness and death have plummeted us into. As health experts and professionals battle to rescue the patient from complications arising of a viral infection still too poorly understood, the compulsions to contain its spread have meant placing the individual in absolute isolation. Clinical expertise suggests that older adults and those who have serious underlying medical conditions may be at a higher risk for developing covid related complications. Yet, no one amongst us is immune from the terrors of imagining the scene of the final hour of life in this situation. To not be able to perform rituals around death feels like a failure of our obligations to the dead, ushering in its own anxieties. As our meaning-making systems seem to come under erosion, our capacity to feel diminishes too, unable to bear the

6. Phillipe Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*. Translated by Patricia Ranum. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1975.

7. Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2007.

overwhelming and incomprehensible pain.

The loneliness in dying becomes too macabre.

It is here that our quest for hope and courage must reappear and radicalize itself. We are on a precipice where our whole cultural and civilizational way of living appears to be under collapse. This quest for a hope and courage that is radical requires us to turn with sobriety to the minor dream-visions we turned away from. There are no quick answers to be found for the sorrow that runs deep. We have become accustomed to a manic denial of loss and a hyper-investment in functionality – itself a product of a capitalist consciousness that impinges on our ability to care for others and to nurture a sense of social responsibility.⁸ Relational Psychoanalysis suggests how an acknowledgment of the damage we may have caused to the other and the guilt that is attached to it are vital in reaching a sense of concern and interdependence and imagining possibilities for reparation.

I am reminded of the works of the psychohistorian Robert Jay Lifton, who forayed into the study of history and vastly extended our understanding of its patterns and repetitions, through his extensive psychological work with survivors of wars and atrocities. Lifton showed that what crystalized as florid pathology in his psychiatric patients was in fact in extreme form the unremarkable pathology of society itself, its psychic fragmentation brought about by the fears and pressures of modern living.⁹ ‘Western Philosophy has long realised

that we must imagine our own death in order to live more fully. After Hiroshima, however, our further task is to imagine the end of the world in order to take steps to maintain human existence.’¹⁰

The long road waits ahead.

I look to images that might make possible the bearing of vulnerability that is a condition of human existence, more acutely now than ever before, and what ethics may be born from the bearing of this vulnerability. I see women, who continue to inhabit the site of loss and destruction, perform the labours of mourning and keep life ongoing, not in heroic grand gestures but in gestures of ordinary rebuilding and stitching back of life together. I think of indigenous cultures that have survived by making peace with the inevitable victors that conquered their land, and painfully renegotiated their cultural definitions of honour, betrayal and courage, while holding on to and recreating their language, its idiosyncrasies, its meanings, its mysteries and secrets, however mad they were deemed to be. I remember the word ‘miracle’. I delve into our relationship to nature, to forests, trees, skies, rivers, non-human beings in their eternal life and death cycles, not God, not technology, as the sacred and the soulful that call for a return and reengagement.

So many seasons of my life
have passed
between habit and promise.
Like lost love letters,
those years
of promise will not return.

This window of spring,
without announcing,
house sparrows came back.

8. Neil Altman, ‘Manic Society: Toward the Depressive Position’, *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 15(3), 2005, pp. 321-346.

9. Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life*. Simon & Schuster, New York, 1979.

10. Robert Jay Lifton and Mitchell Greg, *Hiroshima in America: A Half Century of Denial*. Harper Collins, 1995.

Anxiety and everydayness

LATIKA VASHIST

I am writing this piece to reclaim my words, words which I seem to have lost. I am also writing this to make anxieties – old and new – which the coronavirus pandemic ambushed me with a little bearable. I am writing to make myself recognizable to myself, to keep holding to the fast fading idea of *any* hope.

I want to thank Shiv Visvanathan for pushing me to write this. He helped me find words to describe the aridity of life of my mind over the past few months (or may be years, may be life-times). And, Amit. He stayed with the ‘me’ that I want to run away from, he nurtured our son with an enviable patience and held us all together, tenderly and firmly. These acknowledgments are the prologue to what follows. I began the process of learning to write again, after complete collapse of the structures of language and signifiers

which keep me afloat with some meaning of life, of being alive.

The pandemic caged us in a way that nothing else has in the recent public (and even private) memory. The virus ordered us to ‘Stay at home’, ‘Stay where you are, don’t move’ to ‘save lives’ and we had little choice but to comply. As I write this, I know the ‘we’ that I talk about is the ‘we’ of my habitus. Millions who are not a part of this ‘we’ had little choice but to defy even the demands posed by the cruel, deadly virus (not just the government’s lockdown orders and police brutality). These millions stepped out and walked and walked and walked. Hunger and the fear of starvation were starker, more real, for them.

We watched them, glued to our television sets and smart phones; corporate media – left, right, centre – made us consume these images, made us feel sorry for them, made us good charitable citizens who contributed to X,Y,Z funds. Staying at home, we all were feeling so bad for them. We cursed the governments and politicians with the righteous rage that char-

* Ashley Tellis made many useful edits and made me think about ‘anxiety as hope’ even though I am yet to reach there. I want to thank him profusely. Deepti Sachdev, Jyoti Dogra Sood and Pooja Satyogi who read different drafts reassured me that I was not alone.

acterises (at least some part of) the middle class. We even vowed before our Gods (and on facebook) to ‘do something to help the unfortunate’ (as we prayed and pleaded for ‘our’ safety). The gap between the elites and the underprivileged has never been more visible. The pandemic has only widened it.

Caged in our homes, as we performed the rituals of sanitization with utmost sincerity, a new kind of untouchability gained foothold in our homes. The gated housing societies and residential complexes passed resolutions to ban the entry of domestic workers, nannies, car cleaners, drivers. I too internalized this untouchability when I ‘handed over’ the lockdown wages of my son’s nanny from the first floor balcony. At that very moment, I knew the indignity of this action but I settled myself by shifting my thoughts to my act of charity. But does charity save us from the horror of confronting the abominable beings crisis turns us into?

Our anxious selves, throbbing with anxiety, break all forms of sociality in our fear of losing that which we cannot live without. The instinct of self-preservation does not allow us to see the world beyond the confines of our homes. This, even as we regularly consume images of misery, hunger, death, invoking streams of sympathy in us. While we cooked delicacies and flaunted our lockdown culinary talents on social media feeds, thousands queued up for miles waiting for hours and hours for food relief packages. Even such frightful uncovering of the underbelly of the promises of equality, liberty and fraternity could not destabilize the structural cohesion of the social or the political. The middle class waves of sympathy rose and fell in the dead waters of collective apathy.

The social has, mostly, ceased to exist. Or, has it?

The Covid-19 pandemic has also rendered visible, and even exacerbated, we are told, the hidden crises of mental health. Across the world, lockdown and coronavirus fear have heightened levels of anxiety and stress in people across class, age, gender, and background. The virus struck the living condition with such speed that no one could prepare for the unprecedented new realities that have come to constitute our world today. The marking of vulnerable people – children less than 10, adults over 60, people with A,B,C co-morbid conditions – endangered one’s *whole* world.

Beside the fear of contracting the virus and the ensuing strict social isolation, financial insecurity induced by the lockdown had a huge impact on the mental health of people. According to the International Labour Organization, while 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy (nearly half of the global workforce) were in danger of losing their livelihoods¹ more than one in six young people was out of work due to the pandemic.² In India alone, according to estimates from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, over 122 million people lost their jobs in April.³ These statistics cunningly conceal the unaccountable anxiety,

1. ILO, ‘ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the World of Work. Third edition Updated Estimates and Analysis’, 29 April 2020, available at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-dgreports/-dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_743146.pdf

2. ILO, ‘ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the World of Work. Fourth edition Updated Estimates and Analysis’, 27 May 2020, available at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-dgreports/-dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_745963.pdf

3. ‘An estimated 12.2 crore Indians lost their jobs during the coronavirus lockdown in April: CMIE’, *The Hindu*, 7 May 2020, available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/data/data->

despair and misery writ into the lives of real human beings. We count, record and move on.

To manage anxiety, governments and institutions have come up with detailed advisories. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (India), for instance, advises that ‘at times of anxiety, *practice breathing* slowly for a few minutes. Try *and distance the thoughts* that are making you anxious. *Think of* something calm and serene, and *slow down* your mind.’⁴

The United Nations, drawing on the American Psychological Association and UNICEF, enumerates a few tips on its website for its personnel who may be feeling anxious during/due to the pandemic: *keep things in perspective; get the facts, communicate with your children, remember basic well-being practices, maintain work/life balance, stay in regular contact with friends/family, and use technology creatively* to do this, *practice mindfulness, regulate* your news media monitoring, especially TV news (read articles, instead), a good antidote to adversity is *kindness and compassion*.⁵

The emptiness of these advisories is evident to anyone suffering anxiety. Even in the face of unbridled virus, these advisories sustain the mythical assumption of a subject-in-control, who merely needs to introduce certain behavioural changes (practice breathing, getting facts right, maintain work/life balance, regulating watching news etc.), distract oneself from *that* which induces anxiety (in the present situation, divert one’s mind from the pan-

over-12-crore-indians-lost-their-jobs-during-the-coronavirus-lockdown-in-april/article31520715.ece

4. Available at: <https://www.mohfw.gov.in/pdf/MindingourmindsduringCoronaeditedat.pdf>

5. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/wellness>

demic) and get *hold* of her mind and life. But anxiety escapes all assumptions and injunctions of these advisories. There is no specific *that* which makes one anxious; one drifts in anxiety with nothing to *hold* on to.

Objectless anxiety creeps into one's mind and body to subsume everything, everyone. It has no object and thus is not subject to any control, reassurance, fact check. Anxiety rules, controls, invades, pervades and makes one slave to its whims, whenever, wherever. It awakens the phantoms from the past as well as the future.

As Freud said in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*: anxiety is 'on the one hand an expectation of a trauma, and on the other a repetition of it in a mitigated form [...] Its connection with expectation belongs to the danger-situation, whereas its indefiniteness and lack of object belong to the traumatic situation of helplessness—the situation which is anticipated in the danger-situation.' It is as much about what happened, as it is about what will happen, inducing a state of dizziness where the present collapses under the debris of the haunted pasts and futures. Intertwined between the foregone and the upcoming, the timeless limbo of anxiety silently inscribes itself across timelines and lifetimes, travelling trans-generationally, vertically, horizontally.

Every time I look at my infant (now 18 months old) sleep peacefully, a heart-wrenching feeling of guilt engulfs me. This certainly is not a world children deserve. How could I, we, knowingly bring him into this joyless world on the brink of apocalypse? If only he could go back into my womb and stay there, swimming in a peaceful, uterine universe, protected with my arms curled around him. The children of this world, where are they growing up? The poisonous air and

dying planet, mindless governments hurtling toward the precipice: what world are they growing up in? There is no answer to this guilt, as there is no answer to the desire to have a child.

For care-givers and mothers, anxiety is often bound up with guilt: the guilt about being anxious. *Being* anxious makes one unrecognizable, a stranger to oneself, alienated from the needs and demands of others, a selfish narcissistic self totally turned inwards. How can this anxious self mother anyone? The seamless flow of warmth, love, care, reassurance and hope that is expected of mothering is foreign to an anxious body that shivers feverishly with uncertainty about life.

Yet *somehow* mothers, anxious or not, strive to survive, as long they can, to feed, wash, caress, rock and yes, love their children. I don't know how I managed not succumbing to despair and waddled through childcare, but *somehow* it happened. Our son took his first steps, said his first words ('Em,' he muttered. I quickly added, 'Yes, "M" for Mother') and began showing with all his might that he a distinct entity, not just extensions of our desires or expectations.

We came to live with my parents and their presence helped me step out of the physical and mental inertia that had come over to possess me. My mother toiled all day; by evening her slouched walk would tell us that her back is screaming for rest. Perhaps this is how she evades her anxiety.

After ages I reached out to a book and I don't know why it was Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz: If This is a Man*. On page 6, describing the scene when Italian Jews were ordered deportation to Auschwitz, Levi wrote: 'All took leave from life in the manner which most suited them. Some praying, some deliberately drunk, others lustfully intoxicated for the last

time. But the mothers stayed up to prepare the food for the journey with tender care, and washed their children and packed the luggage; and at dawn the barbed wire was full of children's washing hung out in the wind to dry. Nor did they forget the diapers, the toys, the cushions and the hundred other small things which mothers remember and which children always need. Would you not do the same? If you and your child were going to be killed tomorrow, would you not give him to eat today?'

I read this passage over and over again.

In *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, Rachel Cusk, demolishing the ideal of motherhood, writes: 'When she is with them she is not herself; when she is without them she is not herself; and so it is as difficult to leave your children as it is to stay with them. To discover this is to feel that your life has become irretrievably mired in conflict, or caught in some mythic snare in which you will perpetually, vainly struggle.'

I had started guiltily agreeing with her in the last leg of my 14-month long child care leave, yearning to get back to reading, writing, getting lost in ideas, enlivening the part of myself which I nurtured all my adult life. I had not even come to terms with this conflict of being a mother and being myself, when the pandemic struck a blow to my 'self'. I have to first gather and collect the rusted, broken and lost pieces that used to constitute that 'myself'.

The first casualty of anxiety for me was the life of mind. Words, expression, language, reflection, which shape, sustain and breathe life into an academic-being, sunk into the quicksand that the mind had turned into: a quiet surface atop terrifying ideas and paralysing thoughts. These thoughts were no longer the old, silent companions watching, wondering and experi-

encing the world, but now turned into indefatigable enemies ready to choke me if given any encouragement, any leeway. The war against thoughts can never be won. There is no running away either; they will always chase you, find you. I do not really know when I succumbed to them, but I guess it was when I developed the fear of articulating them. And then, it almost turned into a superstition that put to naught the ‘talking cure’.

So I let my dark thoughts be. Unarticulated, unspoken. I never give them the shape of comprehensible, communicable words and sentences; for the fear this would empower them and they would turn *real*. They are better outside the realm of language, even as they slither through my body, exploding into gruelling pain in my back and ankles when I lie down at night. It is better to be weighed down by the pain than the burden of obstinate thoughts about *what will be*. It was a painful vicious circle where the fear of articulating led to a crisis of articulation. I could not speak out, or reach out. Speech itself became taboo.

Even as the failure of mothering – being an anxious mother who most likely will pass all this anxiety to her child – became pronounced every day, I regressed to my childhood and all the fears came raging back to reside with a ‘me’ that ‘I’ could no longer recognize. The same old feeling – that I had felt everyday, all the time, till I learnt to distract myself with ‘attempting to do well in life’ – crept into me and possessed my body. As a child, I wanted to lock my parents, my brother, everyone I loved in a room. Huddle them together in this safe place, lock it up and guard the door outside. No one would be allowed to enter. No one could go out. So much like the *lockdown*.

The ‘lockdown’ after all is nothing but a delusional space that reas-

sures us of a safety that doesn’t exist anywhere. A safety against the uncertainty of a future, a safety against the incorrigible pace of time that we crave for. The migrants, who walked with their parents, siblings, lovers, partners, children, and defied the lockdown, perhaps were freer of the psychic illusions of safety and security. Perhaps their anxiety transformed into a conviction. How else would one describe their on-foot journeys across hundreds of kilometres?

I compulsively reach out for my son’s forehead, to detect any changes in his body temperature. It has turned into an embarrassing obsession of sorts. But like all obsessions – like the obsession of watching the world news, to be on top of what is happening where, what are the numbers – it serves as the illusion of everything being in control, for the time being. It keeps one functional. Functional enough to return to the *everyday*.

Everydayness sucks one into an abyss, with never-ending chores – from morning till night, everyday, day-after-day, cooking, cleaning, mopping, baby food, washing. As unfinished essays, breached deadlines piled up, I returned to Simone de Beauvoir’s description of the drudgery of the housework: ‘Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. The housewife wears herself out marking time: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present... Eating, sleeping, cleaning – the years no longer rise up towards heaven, they lie spread out ahead, gray and identical. The battle against dust and dirt is never won.’

Lives get on and get over, but these battles of the everyday are never won. Maybe they are not meant to be won because on the other side of the everyday stands profound anxiety in all its might. The everyday helps us hold

the fears and anxieties from which there is no respite at bay.

The unending repetition of nothingness that defines the everyday holds power, like nothing else, to push aside the nudging of mental life that awakens one to terrors of human existence. All the whys, hows, whens are buried silently, at least temporarily, under piles of unwashed dishes, dirty floors, soiled clothes, pending bills, broken water supply pump, leaking basins demanding immediate attention. The everyday, focused as it is on the present, the trivialities of the present, dilutes the painful lingering of the past and allows for the procrastination of all actions and decisions about tomorrow, from the mundane to the profound.

The everydayness destroys one, even as it saves one, for the time being.

As we return to the ‘normal’, the ‘new normal’ – where numbers no longer make a difference, it could be 2000 or 20000 cases a day – adapting to the dangers of the virus in our lives, we go back to our old ways of being and becoming. This pandemic, even as it made us confront the precariousness of our existence, could not make us *really* anxious.

Nothing has *really* changed for the human condition. Thousands of lives destroyed by a flu-like virus, in this day and age, have not led to a collective anxiety that could put a break on the callous pursuits of the human race. Even as we move towards a semblance of normalcy with the numbness of the new normal, instruments and technologies of death and destruction abound. Even as the virus mocks all notions of safe-borders, human lives continue to be lost in mindless pursuits that involve the destruction of the planet, the lives of even those we love.

The world is so different today. How come it is just the same?

Covering the remains of the day during lockdown

SABA NAQVI

POLITICS, citizenship and livelihoods went into a deep freeze when the prime minister gave the diktat at 8 p.m. on March 24 announcing a national lockdown with four hours notice. We have all, ever since, been exiled in our homes, imagining the future could be something like the past, but increasingly uncertain about what will unfold. As middle class Indians shut themselves at home, and many in North India banged pots and pans from their balconies in keeping with the prime ministerial advisory, there were those balcony-less Indians who started a long march to their pastures, fields and hutments in the villages. We called them the ‘migrants’ – these people who travelled to cities and towns to supplement shrinking incomes from agriculture and labour.

The greatest reverse migration in history had begun and I was fortunate to be accredited as a journalist, listed as an essential services, to be both at home with a view from the balcony, and step out for long excursions to witness this amazing regression. In Delhi, overnight, the air had become clean, and peacocks were blundering onto roads as if discovering a brand new world while cars and other vehicles went off. There were other living beings that stepped out in their hundreds, thousands, millions on foot. But they were not there to breathe in the fresh air. They were there to stay alive and their survival instinct told them to walk home or perish.

There were silent groups of walkers who in a trice seem to have taken the extraordinary decision to

journey home without a reservation, both literally and metaphorically. The great Indian railways, the lifeline of the country, had been shut down overnight. Buses worked as and where state governments allowed them to. I made a mental note of what I would say about the great dignity in the stoic march of India's workers as they left India's national capital.

As soon as I stepped out of my home in the Mehrauli neighbourhood of south Delhi, near the Qutub Minar, I saw small groups of people, backpack over shoulder and water bottle in hand, trudging along. The men I met were mostly skilled workers who were leaving shut garment factories, carpenters, welders, and electricians. They were healthy and had decided to walk their way out of joblessness and hunger in the city that would reduce them to being nobodies compelled to eating in food kitchens. These were proud workers, men of some standing in their villages, who supported large families there. Many were returning to small plots of lands in villages where the wheat harvest would begin in April (wheat is sown in November-December and harvested in April).

There were those without any lands too, the stone quarry workers who had walked from Gurugram, a centre of construction and fancy apartment complexes, the route to which takes one past furniture stores, interior designer stores, shop windows that evoke shaded lighting and lush interiors, and many shops selling tiles and flooring. Many quarries had just shut without any notice and wages were due but the manager had disconnected his phone. From a difficult present, these workers were walking back to a hopeless past in the village where they were landless and therefore hired for less wages, if any work was available. It is for people such as these

workers that schemes like MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005) can be a lifeline.

There were also the really destitute, who had lost the ability to hold mind and body together, and did not have anything left to migrate to. They would just move to shelter homes. When the city was buzzing they would get some wages here and there, perhaps even beg. But the beggars were put out of pocket too in the great collective poverty that would hit the already poor that meant more hunger than before, more desperation than before. These were the destitutes whom we shamed but whose existence in such large numbers that became visible as the city disemboweled itself, should always have shamed us.

Fights broke out in shelter homes along the Yamuna with one burnt down. It stood there blackened, a sad testimony to human desperation. Half starved people would be found lying along the riverbank and would be swiftly moved to another shelter to avoid any embarrassment of such a sight in the nation's capital. At that time fear of the virus was at its peak among those tasked with manning food kitchens and shelter homes that were being set up. But the really hungry could not afford the Corona terrors, as there were more immediate things they could die from.

Still, after a few terrible weeks, schools and government structures in the city did gear up to distribute food. How the system worked was that one individual would go with a few ration or Aadhaar cards and collect food for a few individuals. The quality of the food was uneven, in some places palatable, in others just awful gruel.

Ramjeet Yadav was one of those who expected to survive the long march and never thought he would

hold out his hands for food. He was not destitute but proud of the fact that he had come to Delhi 15 years back and gone from youth to middle age with his income reaching Rs 18,000 working in a large garment factory in Gurugram. The family had land in the village so he expected to survive during the harvest and after. I would meet him on March 26 as he began his trek out of Delhi and keep in touch with him over the months to find out how his life had progressed.

Ramjeet was headed to his village in Siddharthnagar district, Uttar Pradesh, not far from the border with Nepal. He had walked from the industrial hub of Gurugram in Haryana and at the southern extremities of Delhi to the border on the east of the city with Uttar Pradesh, where the Anand Vihar Bus terminal is located. Google maps this walk within Delhi at nearly 50 kilometres, but that was just the beginning. His village was 850 kilometres away, and his plan like that of thousands of workers was to walk, hitch a ride, pray for a bus and somehow or the other reach their villages in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. An extraordinary exodus was unfolding before our eyes.

Ramjeet was a drop in the 'river to the ocean' journey that streams of people walking from all parts of Delhi were making. They were all headed East and the river became broader and flowed with a regular ripple as it converged with a strong gush at the Anand Vihar bus terminal on the Delhi border with Uttar Pradesh. Damn the masks people were wearing, they were all submerged in their collective hope of getting a seat on the limited buses available. Their hearts bursting with the desire to go home, they became specks in a tidal wave of humanity at a bus depot. Body pushed body to get onto a bus. The prime minister had spoken of social distancing and told

people to barricade themselves in their homes, but to do so the workers of India first needed to reach their homes. It's extraordinary that the government and authorities seemed surprised as if they had learnt the art of winning elections without any real understanding about how Indians live and survive.

Here Ramjeet's account was a safe journey compared to many others. On day one when I met him he was too proud to accept charity or help. He smiled and said he was looking forward to seeing the family in the village. Later he would tell me that the hunger began gnawing at him and there were good people who began distributing food to the stranded workers. He waited till nightfall at the terminal as thousand of workers continued to stream in. He boarded one bus but was made to get off by the police that said it was too crowded to move. He was then jostled by the police and told to walk to another bus terminal inside the city. The crowds there were even larger. Eventually, he squeezed into a bus where humans were packed next to each other, breath to breath.

This bus moved a few hundred kilometres inside Uttar Pradesh. Then it stopped and passengers were told to disembark. He started to walk again till he was stopped by the state police that helped some workers get on to a truck carrying gas cylinders that was headed in the general direction of his village. That was a favour the police did: packing humans along with gas cylinders. Ramjeet was grateful, he said.

But by then the enthusiasm at the start of the journey, the thought of home was slowly evaporating as he moved deeper into the state. When Ramjeet reached the state capital, Lucknow, he spent the night on the road as people he knew were by then looking suspiciously at the returning

workers as potential carriers of the Corona virus. The next morning he walked again, took a bus to one point, another to another point, till he finally reached his village on the fourth day after starting his journey. No welcome reception was awaiting him. He was put in a makeshift rural quarantine in the village and would step out after 14 days have passed.

Ramjeet accepted charity along the way and says he is worried about how so many people will manage in the village without his city income. But he told me during a phone conversation: we have some land, what will happen to those without land? His story actually turned out relatively well as he seems to have reacquired his status in the village, and four months on when I spoke to him on 21 July, he was sitting in a village chaupal (square), enjoying tea and a smoke with fellow villagers.

Yet he wanted to return to his job as beyond providing for food, farming created no income. He asked for advice on how to return and get a job again. He had worked in a big export company named Richa Global that had a garment-manufacturing factory located in Gurugram. They still owed him a part of his wages but was told he would get that Rs 8000 owed to him when he sent in a resignation letter; though they promised they would reemploy him, he had no legal guarantees of anything.

Meanwhile, the only welfare work he had seen in his village was ration distribution by the RSS. He was also trying to understand how to be eligible for benefits from the state. But whatever he had suffered, Ramjeet remained a fan of India's prime minister, who he believed had not been properly informed about what would happen to people like him when he announced the lockdown.

Eighty percent of India's 470 million workers are in what is called the unorganized sector and are not protected by labour laws. They migrate to big cities such as Delhi (population 20 million) from the rural areas, and send their wages to families in the villages. They live four or more to a room in rented spaces in a city where no income means no rent and eventually no food. The abrupt shutdown without guarantees was what sent workers onto the roads. There were some women and children too who had been pulled out of schools for what they were told would be a brief visit to the village, much like a holiday.

At the start of the journey the children were dressed in shiny new clothes, their hair slickly oiled and braided with shiny clips. These were children protected by their parents. Later, as this exodus went on and on, we would hear tales of child workers that had dropped dead from exhaustion, we would see lives of entire families crushed by trains running on tracks they thought were not in use, and we would learn of children crushed under trucks and buses.

I had covered the migration at a good time; things would get worse. That day in late March when I stood on the border of Delhi talking to some tailors headed to Bahraich in Uttar Pradesh, a writer friend turned to me and asked whether we should also walk to Bahraich. When so many people were making what seemed impossible, indeed incredible journeys, for a moment the thought did cross my mind that we should also just keep walking. We were standing in the middle of one of the largest human migrations – without famine or war.

For the first time, television news was discussing poverty, migration, labour. At a time when people were stuck in their homes watching TV – viewership went up though advertis-

ing revenues crashed – some uncomfortable questions began to be asked. Networks interspersed these discussions on migration with varying and terrifying data about the Corona virus, most of which was proved inaccurate as time went by.

The stories the migrants told had a common theme. They were employed in a small unit that had shut down. Some got their wage, others did not, and some were given just enough money to reach their villages. The contractors and owners told them to go home. Four to five had rented a room near their place of work, but they could not have paid rent and bought food without earning.

People asked on television what the government was thinking when it announced a lockdown with four hours notice and then cut off the lifeline of the Indian railways and interstate transport. Did they fail to understand the nature of the informal sector that employs the majority of Indian workers and did they not know that people would be out of job and home in a matter of hours? Labour experts were actually given time and space to talk.

But then the familiar trope appeared: Muslims as the enemy, who in this instance were apparently the ‘superspreaders’ of Corona virus. Who knows it may be a form of #Corona Jihad, went the narrative on social media. The story of the Tablighi Jamaat arrived to divert from state incompetence. Founded in 1927 in Mewat, India, the Tablighi Jamaat is one of the most powerful religious reform movements of the 20th century Sunni Islam with millions of followers across the world. Puritanical and conservative, members of the order travel across the world, and upon arrival in countries, travel some more to spread the word that they think is the last word on Islam. Travelling and congregating

in order to urge believers to follow a ‘pure’ form of the faith is what they do.

A gathering of thousands at the Tablighi Jamaat’s Delhi headquarters in March was found to be the biggest ‘super-spreader’ of Corona virus in India. The religious order had gathered people with a history of foreign travel in their headquarters in Delhi. Eventually, it would turn out that their congregations also spread the disease in Malaysia and Pakistan. In the age of Corona virus, faith groups and religious congregations did indeed spread the infection, be they Christian or Muslim. (Indeed the BJP is not a faith group but a political party; yet several meetings at its Patna office had led to its state unit chief in Bihar and 75 party members and workers in the office testing positive for the virus by mid-July.)

But the consequences of the Tablighi outbreak were dreadful for the world’s third largest Muslim population, mostly employed in the unorganized sector and reeling from the lockdown as all workers were. At a time when people were scared of the unknown, they settled for hating the known enemy even more than before. Some hospitals in North India began refusing admission to Muslims – one refused to deliver the child of Muslim parents; another hospital in Gujarat segregated Muslims into a separate ward and after an outcry, denied having done so. A legislator of the BJP in Madhya Pradesh was found advocating a boycott of Muslim business; vegetable vendors in some BJP/ angh Parivar ‘hotspots’ were asked to reveal their identity. And TV anchors and networks set about stoking all the subliminal prejudices and speaking in a language that almost seemed to advocate genocide.

Television news has a far greater impact than what is watched at the time of broadcast. Capsules are now made

of the more toxic and communal content produced by networks and shared among millions through social media. This is so because in the first term of Narendra Modi, India became the country with the cheapest data tariff in the world. Jio, launched by Reliance Industries in 2017, offered free data and calls at the time of its launch and sent the industry into a tailspin. It also turned the local mobile phone market into the world’s largest consumer of wireless data.

The plunge in prices led to a surge in data traffic to 1.5 billion gigabytes a month, according to Amitabh Kant, chief executive officer of the NITI Aayog. In December 2017, Kant posted on his Twitter account: Mobile data consumption is higher than USA and China put together. Today it is par for the course to see farmers, labour, drivers and domestic help watch content on their mobile phone when they get a moment away from their hard day’s work.

That is why I have always believed that the 2019 general election was not a post-Pulwana-Balakot or post-Mandal election but a post-Jio election. Only the BJP and Sangh Parivar understood this and created and forwarded content that reinforced its worldview and prejudices. During the Corona virus lockdown therefore, as a grand diversion from economic failures and the consequences of the lockdown, communal content was promoted and continued to grow at a faster rate than at which the Indian economy and employment figures were plummeting.

The disenfranchisement of India’s Muslims is an ongoing project that fundamentally involves demonizing the community and rendering their vote redundant. As we have seen, with free data and growing mobile connectivity this process most frequently now simply involves creating content and

forwarding it. But the process also involves making vicious speeches to demonstrate that it is now possible to threaten, vilify and abuse an entire community and get away with it.

Just preceding the lockdown and the gathering of the Tablighi Jamaat in Delhi, there were vicious communal riots in northeast Delhi from 23 to 26 February. These riots themselves were the outcome of rage against protests that were taking place at several sites in the national capital, where women and students were congregating at sit-ins against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that gave refugee status to people of all faiths except Islam. It was argued that the CAA went against the spirit of the Indian Constitution. As the CAA was a pet project of Home Minister Amit Shah, and part of the ruling party's ideological arsenal, there was no backing down on it.

The protests were organic, creative and captured the imagination beyond Delhi where similar protests were recreated. The lockdown also became the cover for arrests of several organizers, participants and supporters of the protests, who are currently being accused of planning the riots, and being arrested under sections of the law that makes bail difficult. The Muslim community (overwhelmingly the victims of the riots) is therefore being accused of being the perpetrators of their own murder and destruction.

Simultaneously, that one moment in recent contemporary history when Indian Muslim women and students stood up to reclaim their place in the Republic is being presented as something sinister and undesirable. The lockdown has certainly been the occasion to suffocate the idea of multiple and plural citizenship.

Personally, for me the most difficult reporting was to return for seve-

ral days to the part of Delhi where citizens had swiftly moved from riots to lockdown. Houses burnt, bodies still in drains, people were suddenly stranded without work or income in these nightmare localities that looked like war zones. It was still, ghostly and depressing. Most media had also moved away from covering these 'super-spreaders'.

I would learn that North East Delhi, one of India's most densely populated districts, had a mixed population but parts were a microcosm of the livelihood patterns of the minority community. According to data, most Muslim workers are self-employed in the unorganized sector, as they do not get jobs in the state or private sector. They are carpenters, electricians, rickshaw pullers, bakers, welders, or have small manufacturing units in their homes where they employ a few workers. Jafrabad-Seelampur, one of the sites of the violence, for instance, has one of the country's largest wholesale market of ready-made clothes, made by workers in small units or at times distributed among women who could also earn from their homes. Much of the material used to come from China: cheap nylon polyester was imported from China, the manufacturing done in India, and then distributed from several market hubs.

There was, therefore, economic disaster unfolding in these parts soon after the terrible trauma of the riots. Burnt houses, bombed-out cars, and incinerated mosques stood among the clogged, filthy drains into which many human bodies were thrown. No one came to clean the drains during the lockdown, no repairs were possible, and local MLAs vanished. It was just fortuitous for the devastated residents that Ramzan fell during this time, when Muslims do consider it their religious duty to give and share. The middle

class residents of Jafrabad rose to the occasion, distributing food packets although business had been destroyed.

Yet, in poorer parts of North East Delhi such as Mustafabad, where the number of middle class workers became fewer and where the out of work workers lived, one could see human dignity getting degraded step by step. If one appeared on a silent road, burkha clad women would emerge, walk tentatively up to the visitor, and ask for help. The number of women in search of sustenance was growing; many were widows, while others emerged with their faces covered to collect food as some men found it humiliating to stand in food lines.

It was a surreal and moving experience to see these women come up in search of help. These were the occasions when the chroniclers of the time, the journalists, do help—one should ideally take numbers and bank details and organize help, if not directly then through a state authority or NGO. But to stand and start distributing cash would invite a stampede at any disaster site.

I kept returning to Shiv Vihar, a neighbourhood that appeared to have been hit by many cluster bombs. I tracked the movements of many people I had met the day after the violence in February 2020. Salman Ansari, a welder, had his home and workshop burned down. He had my card and stayed in touch; at times he was almost incoherent and did not know the address to which he would move. I met him in one of his rented houses where he lived with his infant daughters and wife, and asked him to come with me to his old home and workshop in Shiv Vihar to see if we could retrieve anything, or take pictures to get some compensation. However, he said he would never return.

Then one day after the lockdown lifted, Salman called again: he was get-

ting calls for work as a welder and had recovered enough self-respect to mention that he had even worked on sites such as the Delhi Metro; some labour he employed was also desperate for work. Could we help him buy the tools for the sum of Rs 20,000? I am ashamed to ask he said, I used to help others and now I have to keep asking. Salman did get his tools and could return to work. If such truths can ever have a happy ending, this was one.

The world that has emerged post-Corona is meaner and smaller than the one before. There are borders between nations, within nations, between towns and villages, between neighbourhoods, and between apartment complexes and the street outside. The gulf between the rich and poor has become wider, as the poor have become poorer while the rich have survived but not prospered. The gulf between communities has increased and hatred for the Muslim community has escalated.

The silver lining is that in the midst of so much hate, there has also been a lot of love that has come our way. The most unexpected people have stepped out to help. The worst and the best of human nature have been on display. I was privileged as a journalist to have witnessed the great tragedies unfolding in the city of Delhi and to record them. The debris that remains with me is in the form of photographs I have taken of three of the 14 mosques that were blasted in India's national capital. I am not religious, but those incinerated mosques are a reminder that we live in a dark, and indeed sinister, age.

Every now and then there is a call from Ramjeet, now exiled in the village, seeking to return to his exile in the city. Salman has mustered up the nerve to reopen his workshop in Shiv Vihar, though he no longer lives there. We have all become exiles in our homes, some more than others.

The pandemic and political order in Bangladesh

ARUN KUMAR GOSWAMI

HOW has Bangladesh so far managed the transmission of Covid-19 and faced the challenges posed by the pandemic? Governments worldwide have followed a different approach to the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic based on scientific findings, but the decisions taken have finally been political, not 'science' based. The entire world, including Bangladesh, has fallen into a precarious state due to the sudden and strong surge of the coronavirus. It was so sudden that no country had any time to counter it.

Nevertheless, before assessing the nature, and possible wear and tear in economy, politics, and society, the demons of Covid-19 have messed up the economy of every country in the world. That said, the successful management of any crisis by a society depends on the effectiveness of its political order. Similarly, the successful management of Covid-19 also relies on the line of effective action taken by the political order of a country. The present paper attempts to assess the effectiveness of Bangladesh political order in tackling the challenges posed by the pandemic.

In his article, 'The Pandemic and Political Order: It Takes a State', published in the July/August 2020 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, American political scientist Francis Fukuyama has identified the factors in the successful management of Covid-19 pandemic. He says, 'the factors responsible for successful pandemic responses have

been state capacity, social trust, and leadership. Countries with all three – a competent state apparatus, a government that citizens trust and listen to, and effective leaders – have performed impressively, limiting the damage they have suffered. Countries with dysfunctional states, polarized societies, or poor leadership have done badly, leaving their citizens and economies exposed and vulnerable.' The three elements, a stable state, social trust, and citizens' response to decision of the leadership that have been mentioned by Fukuyama constitute the main elements of political order.

A stable state survives through crises. Social trust is the key determinant of social and economic development as well as of human well-being. Without trust in others' actions, people may have to consider too many contingencies and uncertainties to take action, destroying the foundation of community and society. On the other hand, turning the decisions of government's leadership into effective action depends on winning the support of millions of people.

The inability of the political order can lead to 'disorder and instability' in society. The American political scientist, Samuel P. Huntington, in his 1968 classical work, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, introduced the concept of 'political order' in the domain of Political Science. The analytical insight of this book 'is astonishing, and cemented Samuel Huntington's reputation as one of the foremost political scientists of his generation.' Before his death in 2008, and for its relevance even in the age of 'third

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wave democratization', Huntington's book was republished in 2006 with a foreword by Francis Fukuyama. Later on, following Huntington's idea, Francis Fukuyama (2011) identified the main elements of political order in his *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*.

However, in order to address the initial question according to the elements of political order, we consider the efforts of the Bangladesh government, Bangladesh Jatiya Sangsad (National Parliament), ruling and opposition parties, society and leadership of Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, for the management of the Covid-19 pandemic.

From the information provided by national and international news media, we find that many countries responded differently to the pandemic. These approaches were informed by scientific findings, but they resulted from political decisions, not science. Nevertheless, all countries were insufficiently prepared or not prepared at all for the sudden appearance of the Covid-19 pandemic.

For example, even after the first Covid-19 detection in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, Covid-affected Chinese were finding their way to Italy. The Mayor of Florence, Italy, in February 2020, even launched the 'hug a Chinese' campaign. As a result of the mishandling by the government, in March 2020, Italy became the worst affected country outside China. It was only after four and half months of the first Covid-19 detection, that the transmission of coronavirus has started to decline in Italy. Nevertheless, the country is still at 15th position among the top twenty Covid-19 affected countries of the world as of August 04, 2020, with the USA at number one.

The government of Bangladesh reacted by imposing a general holiday to contain the Coronavirus pandemic from 26 March 2020. It was extended in phases and ended on 30 May. During the holiday's hospitals, kitchen markets, drug stores and other essential services were left open. The government repeatedly requested people to stay home in its efforts to contain the spread of the virus. But soon after the 24 March announcement, people began leaving the capital in droves for their village homes. Several media outlets reported that hundreds of city dwellers boarded buses and trains to head back home, fuelling fears of further spread of the virus throughout the country.

After the first case was diagnosed in early March, the government of Bangladesh closed educational institutions and nudged all non-essential businesses to go online. The government either scaled down or postponed several events related to the celebration of the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, from 17 March. On 1 April, the government cancelled all public programmes marking Pahela Baishakh, the Bengali New Year, to avoid mass gatherings. The Bengali New Year 1427 began on 14 April 2020. To prevent the transmission of coronavirus, Muslims in Bangladesh also celebrated their biggest religious festival, Eid-ul-Fitr on May 25, 2020 without any outdoor activities this year. Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) on May 22, 2020 issued a 14-point instruction allowing congregations to be held indoors in mosques maintaining cautions asking devotees have to perform ablution from home before coming for Eid prayers, instead of using mosque ablution rooms. Earlier, on May 14, the Religious Affairs Ministry issued a circular asking the authori-

ties concerned to hold Eid Jamaat (congregation) of the Eid-ul-Fitr at nearby mosques instead of Eidgahs (open space for Eid prayers) aiming to contain the spread of coronavirus. The ministry also urged the devotees not to hug each other after Eid-ul-Fitr prayers. Such instructions were also applied during this year's Eid-ul-Azha.

The Muslims of Bangladesh celebrated Eid-ul-Azha on 1 August, as the country grappled with the Covid-19 outbreak with floods inflicting untold suffering on hundreds of thousands of people. The government took several measures to ensure that the celebration did not worsen the outbreak. The government barred congregational prayers of Eid-ul-Azha in traditionally designated open grounds to keep everyone safe. The authorities announced the decision after an inter-ministerial meeting that precluding the use of Eidgah – open areas where prayers were usually held en masse – urging people instead to perform prayers in mosques, which are smaller.

The meeting of National Moon Sighting Committee chaired by secretary, Ministry of Religious Affairs held on 28 July 2020 maintained a similar ruling on prayers for the previous Muslim ceremony of Eid-ul-Fitr in May. The ruling was arrived at via 'consultation with experts, officials and religious scholars'. The decision required the removal of carpets from mosques during the annual prayer, the disinfection of mosque premises before prayers, and greater sanitation and social distance measures. Instead of the National Eidgah, the main congregational Eid prayer will be held at Baitul Mukarram, the National Mosque. The decision also required the elderly, children and those suffering from disease not to attend the prayer.

On August 04, 2020 Bangladesh registered 50 more coronavirus-

related deaths, with this number, the total coronavirus related deaths stood 3,234, as well as 1,918 daily infections for a total 2,44,020. Nineteen people per one million of the population have succumbed to Covid-19 in Bangladesh, which is only bested by India and Pakistan in the region. Bangladesh has tested total of 12,01,256 persons until 4 August 2020. Besides, some 1,955 people have recovered in the past 24 hours of August 4, bringing the overall tally to 1,39,860 since the first case was detected on 8 March.

On 25 March 2020, following the instruction of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, former prime minister and jailed opposition leader Khaleda Zia was released for six months amid the coronavirus outbreak. The 74-year-old opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) chief is serving a 17-year prison term in two graft cases since 8 February 2018. Begum Zia served thrice as the premier since 1991. Her party suffered a miserable defeat in the 2018 elections bagging only six seats in the 300-seat *Jatiya Sangsad* (National Parliament of Bangladesh). She was sent to jail in February 2018 by the court on charges of embezzling foreign donations during her premiership between 2001 and 2006. The donations were meant for an orphanage, named after her slain husband, former Bangladesh president and founder of BNP, General Ziaur Rahman.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has urged the people to visit physicians if they experience any symptom of coronavirus and not to pay heed to rumours about the virus. She issued a 31-point directive on 2 April in view of the Covid-19 outbreak. The prime minister also warned that no corruption would be tolerated in the distribution of relief and advised people not to use personal protective equipment (PPE) meant for health workers.

Following the prime minister's warning, a total of 104 public representatives have so far been suspended for alleged irregularities in cash aid and relief distribution among the destitute since the beginning of the outbreak. According to a Local Government Division (LGD) notification, among the suspended representatives 33 UP are chairmen, 65 UP members, a zila parishad member, four municipality councillors and one upazila vice-chairman. However, reports of such corruption and relief embezzlement have been published in various media outlets.

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) of Bangladesh has warned that the perpetrators of corruption in the health sector will face justice. Meanwhile, the law enforcing agencies have also arrested personnel of private hospitals for providing fake Covid-19 certificates and embezzling money from patients. The government has suspended permission to conduct Covid-19 tests at five private hospitals and diagnostic centres: Shahabuddin Medical, Care Medical College, Stemz Healthcare, and Thyrocare Diagnostic in Dhaka, and Epic Health Care in Chittagong. The authorities have also sealed the Uttara and Mirpur branches of Regent Hospital due to a scam involving Covid-19 tests.

However, amid the crisis of Covid-19 pandemic the national budget for the financial year 2020-21 has been passed by Bangladesh *Jatiya Sangsad* (National Parliament of Bangladesh) with the slogan 'Economic Transition and Pathway to Progress'. The amount of this year's national budget of Tk.568,000 crore is the biggest in Bangladesh's history. The health budget of 2020-21 has been hiked by 23.44 per cent from the revised budget of Taka 23692 crore for the FY 2019-20. The allocation has been increased,

keeping in mind that part of the fund will be spent on dealing with the pandemic. Apart from that the government has kept an amount of Tk. 10,000 crore as 'lump sum' to deal with any emergency health crisis and meet the healthcare needs in the fight against Covid pandemic. In total as much as Tk.41,027 crore has been allocated for the public health sector, which is 1.3 per cent of the GDP and 7.2 per cent of the total budget. The budget has exempted Value Added Tax (VAT) on coronavirus kits to support detection and prevention of Covid-19.

On the other hand, an Integrated Health-Science Research and Development of Tk.100 crore has also been allocated to help develop research in the health-education and science technology sectors. To ensure the proper and effective use of the fund a 'high-powered' committee comprising expert physicians, nutritionists, public health specialists, sociologists, health economists, environmentalists and civil society members will work.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina regularly reviews updates on the situation, and provides the necessary guidance to bolster the country's fight against the pandemic. In such review meetings, the measures taken to contain coronavirus infections, plans on the collection of medical and safety equipment, and future initiatives to inhibit Covid-19 are discussed. On 19 April the government formed a 17-member National Technical Advisory Committee with a view to contain the spread of Covid-19 in the country. On 30 May the prime minister, while holding a meeting with the National Technical Advisory Committee – formed to fight Covid-19 in the country – directed the concerned authorities to engage local public representatives in a greater way to contain the spread of coronavirus in the country.

All offices and public transport reopened on 30 May on a limited scale after over two months of nationwide shutdown amid fears of further increase in the number of Covid-19 infections and deaths.

With the country grappling with the pandemic, cyclone ‘Amphan’ headed towards Bangladesh, posing another challenge to the authorities. People living on the coast had to be evacuated while maintaining social distancing and hygiene with limited resources. ‘Amphan’ turned into a severe cyclonic storm and hit the country on 19 May. The task of keeping people safe across the coastal areas became immeasurably more complicated due to the pandemic. However, in a matter of days, Bangladesh prepared almost 10,500 additional shelters—over and above the 4,171 in existence—to accommodate evacuees with a measure of social distancing. More than 70,000 ‘cyclone preparedness’ volunteers across coastal areas were mobilized. Masks, water, soap and sanitizer were distributed. On the other hand, the garment industry, reeling from cancelled export orders, retooled production lines to manufacture personal protective equipment.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina jointly wrote an article with Patrick Verkooijen, who is the chief executive officer of the Global Center on Adaptation, regarding the twin perils of cyclone Amphan and the coronavirus pandemic. The article was published in *The Guardian* of London on 3 June 2020.

The leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been hailed in managing the crisis, taking decisions, communicating with the field-level administration regularly through video conferencing. The prestigious US magazine *Forbes* praised Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and placed her in the list of successful women leadership

for her sincere efforts to contain the coronavirus pandemic in Bangladesh. The magazine said Sheikh Hasina, the country’s longest serving prime minister, started evacuating Bangladeshi citizens from China in early February. She harnessed tech, installing screening devices across international airports, which screened some 650,000 people (of which 37,000 were immediately quarantined), something the UK still is not doing.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is also looking after the opposition leaders, Mujahidul Islam Selim and Dr. Zafarullah, who have been affected by coronavirus. The result of a sample survey conducted by Germany’s international broadcaster Deutsche Welle (DW) on 29 May, indicated that most people do not trust the main opposition BNP. The respondents were asked, ‘Do you think that the United Front led by BNP could play any effective role in Bangladesh politics?’ Out of four thousand, most of the respondents, i.e. 81% said ‘no’ and only 19% said ‘yes’.

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected people’s thinking across the globe with the unpredicted challenges and worries it has posed. Critical decisions in these times of uncertainty are taken based on little information. However, the Bangladesh government’s digitalization measures have helped to fill the information gap. Flexibility of response is essential in a pandemic even though political toughness implies standing firm on decisions already taken. Based on new data, the decisions may be changed.

Finally, the picture that has emerged from the pandemic in Bangladesh and other countries, raises many questions about the existing political order. However, it is too soon to assess the success or failure of any country in tackling the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Reflections on capital, identity and the corona conundrum

SARASIJ MAJUMDER and SUDEEP BASU

BORDERS, mobility, and crossings are metaphors of our transnational existence. These concepts are used to describe both movements of capital, and human beings or labour. For capital, they emerge and dissolve with regulations and their relaxations. For labour, they restrict movements and incite aspirations. In either case, the concepts become real in the actions and processes initiated by actors, human and institutional, both powerful and with less power.

The pandemic enables us to look at these metaphors anew, to read the structural effects occasioned by Covid-19, which emerge as real through governance and livelihood practices. While borders mean national borders that is guarded by the state, borders also mean boundaries separating groups of human being living in the same social space. Likewise, mobility has dual meaning of both geographical and social mobilities and how they intersect.

Our main contention is that the pandemic makes flows of labour and capital more complicated leaving the structural underpinnings of global capitalism intact. While it challenges the world is flat narrative, it hardly

heralds a better world. One has to at the outset recognize the emergent logic of governance in the context of mobilities, as the flexible containment of population.

We identify two logics in the emergent responses to migration. One is the neoliberal governance thematic which prioritizes economy over people, and the other is the populist logic that hierarchizes or divides the population on racial, ethnic lines to institutionalize a graded arrangement of citizenship using fear and withholding rights. These two sometimes coalesce to produce massive transformations of space, place, and territory generating developments and unevenness that attract migration flows. Often they go separate ways. This produces responses that can have a gamut of effects on the citizenry as well as illegal immigrant subjects.

The emergence of the global Covid-19 pandemic seems to have overturned one of the logics in many ways. The outbreak has shifted the attention from the economy to the people. This shift is temporary, messy and episodic. Yet the shift is a reversal of a well entrenched neoliberal logic that valued profit over people. The

reversal was palpable in the rising significance of public health workers, doctors and nurses, whose values are not fully recognized in the market or even in popular opinion. A Spanish ex-minister commented that popular footballers earn millions of dollars but corona virus vaccine will be discovered by biologists who rarely earn as much.

At the other end of the spectrum, however, we see the renewed assertion of jingoistic nationalism or the populist logic that empower the right-wing politicians. Authoritarian rulers are trying to grab powers of surveillance at an unprecedented scale that they could only wish in the pre-pandemic period. Coupled with such desires, there is a fresh resurgence of politics of hatred that is being instigated and used by the world leaders and populist politicians to further strengthen their respective positions. How these two tendencies interact and counteract each other will shape national societies, global political economy or trajectories of capitalism or its neoliberal variant. While the identifiable structures and actors, such as the states, leaders, people on the street get all the attention, the force or process that can match the invisibility of the virus is capitalism in its many guises.

Capitalism(s) unlike the virus is more ubiquitous. But the main characters in the potent drama that unfolds are capitalism, virus and the ubiquitous life and mortality of populations. They are forces and events that explode before us to be reckoned with because at this moment capitalisms scalar abilities to affect our lives can only be matched by the pandemic or the virus. The sheer spatial scale of the spread of the virus and the speed at which it contracts and the ease of getting exposed to it has challenged capitalism (or its neoliberal form) on three

fronts: regulatory/ethical front, spatial front, and its rational and calculative character.

First, on the regulatory front, this virus originates in precarity that is an outcome of capitalisms unwillingness to regulate and promote freedom at the expense of health. Precarious living pushes/pushed poor people in China to hunt wild animals and trade in them. Yes, such practices emerged in Maoist China that inflicted people with acute food shortages. But those practices got upgraded into an unregulated trade and big business in capitalist China legalized by the state. The virus crosses over to human body from the animal body not simply because of proximity but also because of the conditions in which animals are kept and harvested. Caging wild animals in large numbers in tiny containers emit the virus that remains dormant in their bodies.

The same is true of industrial farming practiced in the West/US. Mad cow disease outbreak is a good case in point. While cost-effectiveness and profitability justify unethical production practices, yuppie consumer movements recommending ethical living and vegan diets focused on individuals are touted as the radical resistances to larger structural issues of production and lack of regulation. The question that the corona pandemic raises is that how long we can remain blindfolded to the issue of unbridled meat production and precarities associated with it.

Second, this pandemic affects consumption and supply chains simultaneously upsetting the global capitalist distinctions between zones of production and zones of consumption. The former being primarily China and the latter Europe and the US. Pandemics planetary character does not leave capital with any leeway to keep one

site on tenterhooks or in competition with other sites to which business or investment can be instantly moved.

The pandemic compresses space and time but not from capital's vantage point. While space-time compression is the characteristic of late capitalism reliant on finance and hot money which knows no barrier, the opposite has been true for many working people. Migration across national borders has become more challenging. Demand for cheap labour in growing cities are, however, met by poor illegal migrants. Their illegalities or transgressions of stringent migration rules push them to shadowy existence that suppress their voices.

By bringing the economy to a halt, the virus leaves the space-time uncompressed, i.e. increases the notional distance between places for both capital and labour. Ease of travel is greatly compromised. Rules of entry and exit from a country become more stringent. Additionally, a cold war like impasse continues in the field of internet technology between China and USA as the trade war between them intensifies. Such processes can potentially dismantle globalization.

Global and domestic trade, supply chains and consumption cannot gain momentum without redistribution and investment in sectors that value people over profit. The question is how the regimes that profess austerity will respond to this situation. Trickle down clearly does not work. This brings us to our third point, i.e. capitalism's rational and calculative character.

The emergency socialist measures show that calculative character of policy making, the hallmark of neoliberalism, is at abeyance. It is in a way a carnivalesque moment. While political action is being undermined in the name of war and solidarity, the

virus can and has potentially opened up spaces to express dissent against not just the state but the attitudes. The virus has brought to the foreground the views, grievances and struggles that health workers, like the Asha workers, have been harbouring and waging for quite some time. In that sense it is carnivalesque vis-à-vis the austerity.

Austerity measures are still being implemented but public opinion might be turning against austerity at least in key sectors. Or we should be observing if the virus gives voice and deepens democracy and also how that tendency is countered and undermined by the agents of the neoliberal establishment by subtly pandering to the populist logic mentioned above.

The institutions that defend capital is pitted against the spectre of pandemic that is seen to favour welfare style socialism. What Covid-19 enjoins states to do is to equalize that which was unequal before the pandemic on two fronts, make health facility available to all or at least the poor and mass production of equipments for running the health economy made into a business of the state. What we have here is the omnipresence of a state which is not dictatorial but one which is paternalistically inclined, authoritarian and highly dependable in extreme crisis or at least that is what a state run media is making us believe, in an increasingly mediatized environment.

This plausible outcome of Covid-19 forces us to rethink valorizations tied to capital. How the latter while it may try to wriggle out of its impotency in pandemic times through the backdoor of power relations and the deepening of technology in our lives, 'social distancing' and the threat of contracting the virus due to exposure makes war or escalating conflicts an unviable solution to the crisis of capital unlike in normal times. Labour

disciplining is one way out of the crisis of capital but the humanitarian outcomes will force capitalists and the state to abide by safety and health standards for workers. This becomes like a never-ending cycle of debts and its revival is through conceiving of altogether new ways of being with capital, a constitution of the pandemic subject which recognizes the priority of biological life and non-rational sphere of values and labour above capital.

Further the pandemic behoves us to pose the question to ourselves about who we are as a collective and where we are socially and spatially located, our social identities, being reconstituted in response to the capriciousness of capital stultified by the existential threat posed by the virus.

Alertness is warranted specially when the Covid-19 pandemic has shown signs of a revival of eugenic-like discourse of herd immunity which may have to run its course, when discovery of a suitable vaccine is uncertain. For the discourse can spawn new kinds of insubordinations, violence and expulsions of those who are supposedly thought to be weak in terms of biology and culture. While the pandemic exacerbates the precarity of labour and unevenness of spatial development as witnessed in the return of migrants from cities like Mumbai and Delhi following the lockdown, the pandemic itself created conditions where 'bare life' became more important than the imperatives of capital and livelihoods which forces a consequent rethink about our dependencies, hierarchies, value systems, solidarities and ethno-national identifications.

Coronavirus enjoins states and people to cooperate, foster peace, divert resources for promoting regional development and value expert knowledge as a route out of the pandemic.

The spectre of Indian Muslims in India's Covid experience

MISRIA SHAIK ALI

THE essay emotes with two images: the phrase 'sleeper spreaders' and another image I came across on Twitter – of a man's silhouette with 'a green cap', his body filled with bombs and hands with coronavirus. These representations are of Muslims who attended the Tabliqi Jamat's annual conference at the Tabliqi Jamat headquarters in Nizamuddin, Delhi, that started on 3 March 2020 and continued until a few days before Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the Janata Curfew on 23 March.¹

These representations are of the Muslim, seen through the eyes of a Hindu Nation, today's New India.² As such representations spewed my social media feeds, I wondered if they were actually talking about the morally

and civically irresponsible behaviour of the Tabliqis. The extrapolation of Tabliqis into the Muslim imagery of the New India narrates a different story to me, and the best way for me to make sense of the event was to engage with rhetorical refusal; I would deny to talk about the Hindutva spun category, the Indian Muslim, and therefore this essay is about the Muslims of India.³

It is impossible to talk about the latter in the current atmosphere of self-defence that Muslims have adopted against the rising hatred in their country, while the former belongs to debate. Owing to that self-defence, which also structures this essay, the essay alternates between the Indian Muslim, who has emerged as an epitome of the enactment of victimization in the New India, and Muslims of India which is more of an imagination for, as sociologist Shiv Visvanathan noted, a 'creative Muslim' social order in a political moment when imaginations and feel-

nation if elected into power including the construction of the Ram Mandir.

* The author thanks Kaushik Tekur, K12 Techno Services, Nishanth Kunnukattil Shaji, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and Parth Viswakarma for their comments on the article.

1. On 13 March, the Delhi government had issued an advisory curbing congregation of over 200 people. The Tabliqi Jamat conference was clearly in violation of it.

2. The 2019 General Elections manifesto of the BJP promised that the party will make a 'New India', via its plans to reform the

3. John Schlib, *Rhetorical Refusals: Defying Audiences, Expectations*. Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 2007.

ings are denied to the Indian Muslims.⁴ In such a way, this essay alternates between silence, a terrain of experience for Indian Muslims, and synaesthetic sensoria, a topos/place for Muslims of India.

Submerged under the spectre of the Muslim images are two things: the Covid-compelled dismantling of the Shaheen Bagh protest in Delhi, a place where Muslim women of India came together in December 2020 to protest the Citizenship Amendment Act, and the change in azan my mother made me listen to, once the lockdown came into place, saying it's a once in a lifetime that a Muslim would hear a change in the azan. The azan, a call for Muslims to offer prayers, generally called out five times a day, was different this time, and was civically responsible in containing the spread of SARS-CoV 2. The phrase 'Hayya 'ala-l-Falah' urges every follower, mostly men (as they are allowed to congregate for prayers at the mosque), to rush to their nearby mosques for prayer. In the light of the global spread of the SARS-CoV2, it was replaced with an advisory to all Muslims to pray at home and not to congregate.

'Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah. Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah. Ashadu anna Muhammadan Rasool Allah. Ashadu anna Muhammadan Rasool Allah. Hayya 'ala s Salah. Hayya 'ala s Salah. (come for prayer) Hayya 'ala l-Falah. Hayya 'ala l-Falah. (come to prayer congregation):

Sallu Fi Beyootikum (or) Sallu Fi Rihalikikum (Offer prayer at home)

Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! La ilaha illa Allah.'

With at least 300,000 active mosques in every nook and cranny of India, hearing an azan on the loudspeaker is something every Indian would be used to. The submergence of a certain civically responsible behaviour of the Muslims of India, asking people to pray at home and not congregate, need not be juxtaposed against the morally irresponsible behaviour of the Tabliqi Jamat to showcase on the bloodstained roads of New India that there are 'good Indian Muslims'. The submergence was indeed visible when the Allahabad High Court heard a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed by Afzal Ansari, Salman Khurshid and Wasim A. Quadri, around mid-May 2020, pleading the court to intervene in the state-ordered curfew on azans being broadcast through loudspeakers during the lockdown.⁵

The letter/petition written by senior advocate Salman Khurshid, which was later treated as a PIL, showed the extrajudicial actions, like unsigned notices issued to mosques, and threats leveraged against mosques, even on occasions where the azan was not called out, by the Uttar Pradesh police, who have become a machinery of Hindutva violence perpetuated by the state under the leadership of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath.⁶

'According to him [the petitioner], Azan is integral to religion and in no way undermines the society's collective response to the pandemic. It has been further pleaded that local administration at Farrukhabad has

been somewhat ambiguous about the recitation of Azan and the local police continues to threaten coercive steps against recitation of Azan. It was further pleaded that local police and administration have pasted unsigned notices on the entrances of several mosques in the city and all attempts made to seek redressal from the District Administration have been unsuccessful which has caused unnecessary disquiet and apprehension of violation of this religious right in the local Muslim populace.'⁷

The Uttar Pradesh state, with little interest in deciphering the rephrased azan call, which was by then adopted in many mosques across the world, put a curfew on the 1400-years-old Islamic tradition of observing the fasts on hearing the sunrise azan, *Subhu*, and breaking it with the sunset azan, *Mahrib*, during the month of Ramadan. This became blatant when the state Advocate General Manish Goyal's only argument against the petitioners was that azan is 'a call for congregating to offer prayers at the mosque'. The sense of community protection that haunts public concerns around the Coronavirus, conversed through the phrase 'Sallu Fi Beyootikum' (offer prayer at home), was eroded in the very fact that azan is an 'Islamic tradition'. The court states:

'Learned counsel for the petitioner has not been able to explain why Azan cannot be offered without the use of sound amplifying devices. It will be not out of place to mention that in the past, during old days when the loudspeaker was not invented, Azan used to be given by human voice. The use of loudspeakers is a practice developed by someone and

4. Misria Shaik Ali, 'What the Ayodhya Judgment Makes Evident: New India Is a Place of "No Muslim Things"', *FirstPost*, 19 November 2019. <https://www.firstpost.com/india/what-the-ayodhya-judgment-makes-evident-new-india-is-a-place-of-no-muslim-things-7660991.html>.

5. Afzal Ansari and 2 Others Vs. State of U.P. and 2 Others. See <http://elegalix.allahabadhighcourt.in/elegalix/WebShowJudgment.do>

6. Harsh Mander, John Dayal and Natasha Badhwar, *Reconciliation: Karwan E Mohabbat's Journey of Solidarity through a Wounded India*. Context (imprint of Westland Publications), Chennai, 2018.

7. Afzal Ansari and 2 Others Vs. State of U.P. and 2 Others. See <http://elegalix.allahabadhighcourt.in/elegalix/WebShowJudgment.do>

not by the Prophet or his main disciples, and which was not there in the past, and that the loudspeaker is of recent origin and accordingly it could not be said that the use of loudspeakers and loud-speaker is essential and integral part of the Azan. There is no such religious order which prescribes that Azan can be recited only through loudspeakers or by any amplifiers. Azan is certainly an essential and integral part of Islam but use of loudspeakers and loud-speakers is not an essential and an integral part thereof. Loudspeakers is a gift of technological age, its adverse effect is well felt all over the world. It is not only a source of pollution but it is also a source which causes several health hazardous. Traditionally and according to the religious order, Azan has to be recited by the Imam or the person in-charge of the Mosques through their own voice. Right to religion, by no stretch of imagination, ought to be practised, professed and propagated saying that loudspeakers has become an essential part of the religion.’⁸

The architectonic of the court’s order emerges from the tension between the parochial, the religious, the traditional and the subjective, and the modern, the technological and objective. Such dualisms were produced as conditions that render modern scientific thinking possible by the writings of natural philosophers like Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes.⁹ The commitment to upholding Cartesian dualisms and teleological thinking is sedimented by the faith that the shift from traditional to technological, parochial to modern is indeed possible and as that which ena-

bles human progress. In such a way, religious practices that create new subjective possibilities for coexistence (a coexistence that’s anti-exclusionary) under Covid like the phrase ‘Sallu Fi Beyootikum’, is black-boxed as traditional and parochial while the technological, although recognized to have ‘adverse effects’, is considered progressive and hence can never be, to cite from the order, ‘an essential part of the religion’.

While at one level the essence of loudspeakers is denied its intermingling with the essence of Islam, at a second level, Islam is denied ‘the stretch of imagination’ to understand how its sensorial practices of listening can be redefined for, to borrow a phrase from Shiv Visvanathan, ‘a new contract, even a sacramental order between orality, textuality and digitality’.¹⁰

At a third level, the court in asserting that ‘no stretch of imagination ought to be practised, professed and propagated saying that loudspeakers has become an essential part of the religion’ not only commands Islam and talks against the reinvention of Islamic social contract by the Muslims of India, but in doing so confesses its own anxiety, layered under the Machiavellian text of the order, about the modernist Abrahamic tradition of Islam. This anxiety seeps through and haunts the everyday experience of the Hindu psyche, constituted today— through 50,000 daily Shakhnasas and political campaigns—to be anxious about the monotheistic allure of Abrahamic religions. While Moses, as Freud claims, gave Jews the monotheistic idea, Dayanand Saraswati, founder of the Arya Samaj (a Hindu reform movement), gave his Hindus the monotheistic idea by refin-

ing Hinduism to desire one god. The monotheistic idea of Hinduism was further refined by the second supreme leader of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), M.S. Golwalkar, in *A Bunch of Thoughts*, which regarded the creation of a Hindu Nation as something to strive for.

‘In terms of the letter dated 28.04.2020, addressed by Mr. Salman Khurshid, which has been treated as Public Interest Litigation, that reciting of Azan is a call for the five times prayers, particularly the morning Fajr which is also the beginning of Roza fast as well as Maghrib which is the breaking of fast at sunset. It has been further pleaded that there has never been any restriction on recitation of Azan by the use of loudspeakers to call the faithful to prayer. According to him, Covid-19 pandemic has necessitated stringent containment measures and Muslims across the country have promptly and willingly accepted that congregational prayer be suspended as long as the danger of spread of infection continues. Leading seminaries like Deoband and religious leaders have advised people to perform Namaz at home consistent with social distancing norms. According to him, Azan is integral to religion and in no way undermines the society’s collective response to the pandemic.

It has been further pleaded that local administration at Farrukhabad has been somewhat ambiguous about the recitation of Azan and the local police continues to threaten coercive steps against recitation of Azan. It was further pleaded that local police and administration have pasted unsigned notices on the entrances of several mosques in the city and all attempts made to seek redressal from the District Administration have been unsuccessful which has caused unnecessary dis-

8. Ibid.

9. Ashis Nandy, *Science, Hegemony and Violence: A Requiem for Modernity*. United Nations University, Tokyo, 1989.

10. Shiv Visvanathan, ‘Towards a New Ontology of South Asia’, *Seminar* 719, July 2019, pp. 87-91. http://www.india-seminar.com/2019/719/719_shiv_and_kanak_manu.htm.

quiet and apprehension of violation of this religious right in the local Muslim populace. Similar issues have arisen from Ghazipur and Hathras that may require directions for uniform legal regime across the State of Uttar Pradesh.

Lastly, it has been pleaded to this Court to preserve the spiritual comfort and the wholesome spirit of constitutional right to worship of all citizens. One notice issued under Section 149 Cr.P.C. by the Officer-In-Charge (Prabhari Nirikshak), Police Station Dildar Nagar, Ghazipur has also been placed on record.¹¹

Salman Khurshid remarked in his letter that azan was a matter of 'spiritual comfort' and demanded that the court preserve 'the wholesome spirit of constitutional right to worship of all citizens' by preserving Muslims' spiritual comfort. How can the spirituality of a secular constitution warrant the preservation of the spiritual comfort of a religious group? In a manner of avoiding matters of spirituality, religion and the nation state, the order immediately moves onto saying: 'One notice issued under Section 149 Cr.P.C. by the Officer-In-Charge (Prabhari Nirikshak), Police Station Dildar Nagar, Ghazipur, has also been placed on record' – a move that distracts it from the ultimate question of the struggle for Indian Independence: how to understand secularism, or for that matter science, by not merely adopting western secularism (or science)?

The anxiety is captured in the order's architectonic where the order distracts itself from matters of Islamic 'spiritual comfort' and the right to religious freedom that sediments the secular spirit of the Indian Constitution

and proceeds to talk about the bureaucratic notice issued by the UP police to a mosque in Gazipur. Is it that the spiritual comfort of Muslims, and so the spirit of secularism, so impossible to reckon with for the imaginary of a secular state established after Partition as India that this distraction onto bureaucratic matters in the order's script, was made necessary immediately after enlisting the spiritual comfort of Muslims and the secular spirit of the Indian Constitution? Can law understand the epistemological framing of Indian Muslim? Can one understand why the Indian Muslim, conflated with terrorism and Pakistani Muslims, continues to haunt the tumultuous political terrain of India?

Before we get into the haunting of Indian Muslims, the non-present presence looming over New India, I would like to offer a fourth level of interpretation. The court, by denying the benefits of modernity and technological progress like loudspeakers themselves to the Islamic tradition of azan, in its modernist thinking, temporalizes the Muslim as one who belongs to the parochiality of the traditional, or in the manner of teleological thinking, one who belongs to pre-modernity and the past.¹² The Muslim is also constructed as one who belongs to the past (to the times of Mughals, Ottomans and Nizams) in the acute need felt by Modi's regime to 'modernize madrasas', an educational institute for Muslims and by Muslims.¹³ The *Hindu Rastra's*

12. The seven-judge bench of the Supreme Court of India, in 1954, established the practices that are essential part of a religion to encompass all practices that the 'doctrines of that religion itself' advocates for (Madras vs. Shri Lakshmindar Tirtha Swamiyar of Shri Shirur Mutt). This involves a constant return to the oral traditions of the religion and its texts. However, the command by the Allahabad High Court expresses the impossibility of interpreting religious practices for the digital world order that constitutes today's

Indian Muslim, like the White Man's Indian or indigenous peoples of the Americas, under the monotheistic and modernist thinking of Hindutva, is nested in 'his' tradition, past and parochiality.¹⁴ Muslims as belonging to the past, frames the Hindutva imaginary that is required to make India into a Hindu Rashtra.

The Muslims of today's India, those who live after the industrial revolution where sonic devices have flooded the market to amplify sound in environments of excessive white noise, are denied the reinvention of azan in digital ways, for a digital world, via this court order and the essential religious practices established in 1954. They are asked to rest in peace by imagining as though they are listening to the beautiful voice of the Ethiopian former slave,

social reality and hence, bounds religion to orality and textuality. Such a practice frames religion to the traditional and in the past and not to the modern and the present stemming from the modernist anxiety about the traditional.

13. '5cr Minority Students to Get Scholarship in 5 Years', *Times of India*, 12 June 2019. Accessed 15 July 2020. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/5cr-minority-students-to-get-scholarships-in-5-years-govt/articleshow/69748292.cms>.

14. I specifically use 'his' to point to the perversity of the Hindutva regime that constructs the Muslim men of our households as the perverse element it desires to jail under Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019. The fear that demands protecting Hindu women from the cusp of savage Muslim men if interpreted through Fanon's analysis of the black man shows the emergent order of political alter(ity)-erotica where both the Muslim man and the Hindu women indulged in 'Love Jihad' are subjugated by the patriarchal order of Hindutva. On White Man's Indian and the politics of subjugation of American Indians in the USA, see Sarah S. Kavanagh, 'Haunting Remains: Educating a New American Citizenry at Indian Hill Cemetery', in *Phantom Past, Indigenous Presence: Native Ghosts in North American Culture and History*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2011, pp. 151-78 and Robert F. Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: The History of an Idea from Columbus to the Present*. Knopf, New York, 1978.

Bilal ibn Rabah (pbuh) one of the closest companions, *Sahabahs*, of Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) and emancipated by the Prophet (pbuh), which echoed through the silence of Arabian deserts the call for prayer, azan, in the 7th century.

The court order further constructs the azan called out via loudspeakers as ‘noise pollution’, while it is precisely the noise pollution of modernity and industrial revolution that demands azan to be called out via loudspeakers so it could reach the community – asking for them to stay quarantined and offer prayers at home in the time of coronavirus. *The controversy around the Muslim and loudspeakers explicate a synthesized sensoriality of New India, where the act of listening to the other is framed, defined and conditioned by the seeable, the spectacle and the spectre.*

The sensoriality of listening (amplified by the non-essential loudspeakers) conditions the act of listening amidst the spectacle of marginalization that is carefully assembled by a Hindu Nation for the Indian Muslim: to listen to the message of azan is conditioned by what is seen (spectacle) and the seeable, namely the (presence of) Muslim and ‘the invisible’ coronavirus through images like sleeper spreaders and the Twitter image. The inescapability of the modernist legal imagination that associates religion to the past, and its traditions as being parochial, confines the Allahabad HC’s order from the fruitful exercise of what the theologian and philosopher Raimundo Panikkar calls diatopical hermeneutics.

Diatopical hermeneutics is a possibility that Panikkar offers to overcome ‘the gap existing between two human topoi, ‘places’ of understanding and self-understanding, between two – or more – cultures that have not developed their patterns of intelligibility...

Diatopical hermeneutics stands for the thematic consideration of understanding the other without assuming that the other has the same basic self-understanding.’¹⁵ Such an act of deciphering the text of azan, an engagement with the other, in the times of coronavirus – Sallu Fi Beyootikum (or) pray at home – was circumvented by the Allahabad HC for a lecture on the significance of modernity to human progress (a problematic that a century worth of works in cultural critique of science and modernity has dismantled).¹⁶

As Levinas remarks, ‘addressing the other is inseparable from understanding the other.’¹⁷ The non-engagement in deciphering the text of the call for prayer during the pandemic stemming from a disinterest in understanding the Other, renders the HC order as one that does not address the Other (although it addresses the concern of the petitioners) thereby othering the Indian Muslim even further back to their religious pasts.

Shiv Visvanathan, in calling for an idea of secularism that is hospitable and dialogic, redefines secularism along the lines of alterity, as ‘the way we respond to other’, arguing against both Muslim fundamentalism and Hindu fanaticism. Rasel Ahmed, a journalist from Bangladesh and the

editor of *Roopbam*, explicates that gayness and homosexuality are othered and tormented by Hindu fanaticism and Muslim fundamentalism by narrating his own experience of fleeing Bangladesh for being gay, and seeking refuge and possible citizenship in India, which has been rendered impossible, just for Muslims, by the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019.¹⁸

My lived experiences of being an Indian Muslim also suggests the impossibility of talking about feminine sexuality or homosexuality within the frames of the households that middle class Indian Muslims emerge from. In not allowing for dialogues or engagement with those whom a culture considers as the other, the culture erects walls of alterity. First, as a way of seeing, the shift from Indian Muslims to Muslims of India comes with talking about that which is difficult to engage with, otherness – be it an engagement with the others of Muslim communities of India like those who are homosexuals or an engagement between Hindus, Muslims and peoples of *other religions of India*. Second, to engage with Muslims of India is to talk about Muslim-ness in India as it belongs to the present and to situate them in the topias (locations) of Hindutva. An engagement with Muslims of India, rather than the Indian Muslims, is necessary for the emergence of a creative Islamic social contract where the ontological experience of Muslim-ness in India enunciates a new ordering along orality, textuality and digitality and for reconciling social difference in India. Any act of interpreting such an ordering in itself should stem from

15. Comment on ‘Diatopical Hermeneutics’. *Search Results Web Results Diatopical Hermeneutics – Panikkar Written Words* (blog). <http://www.raimon-panikkar.org/english/gloss-diatopic.html>

16. Such works include M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*. Soil and Health Library, Exeter, 1910; Jitendra Pal Singh Uberoi, *Science and Culture*. Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1971; Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Polity Press, Cambridge, 1986; S. Irfan Habib, *Jihad or Ijtihad? Religious Orthodoxy and Modern Science in Contemporary Islam*. Harper-Collins Publishers India, New Delhi, 2012.

17. Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-other*. Athlone Press, London, 1998, p. 6.

18. Rasel Ahmed, ‘First Person: As a Persecuted Gay Muslim from Bangladesh Seeking Refuge, I Wasn’t Welcome in India’, *Scroll.in*, 25 December 2019. <https://scroll.in/article/947811/first-person-as-a-persecuted-muslim-bangladeshi-seeking-refuge-i-wasnt-welcome-in-india>.

Panikkar's idea of diatopical hermeneutics where social groups, including the Muslim, have to be necessarily put in the difficult position of engaging with the others of its own selves.

It is to the effectuation of a creative Islamic social contract that Friedrich Kittler's analysis of Nietzsche's writings, and the material basis of the voices/noises he heard while writing, becomes useful.¹⁹ Kittler's analysis of discourse networks of the 1800s or Romanticism, and the 1900s or Modernism, focused on how the materiality of technological ruptures, like the invention of the typewriter, telegram and other inscription devices, shaped writing and the production of the discourses of romanticism and modernity. For Nietzsche, Kittler explicates, the noise from the pen scratching against the paper, the sound from the typewriter as words get inscribed into text, are integral to the shaping of what's spoken, written and thought. Hence, he claims that the very act of writing and typing empties the meaning from the words written as it gets lost in the white noise emerging from the materiality of writing with pen and paper or the typewriter.

Kittler remarks that the presence of voice, white noise or 'deafening noise' emerging from the materiality of sound from paper and typewriter and not the orally spoken word, for Nietzsche, 'halted all erotic exchange between orality and writing, reducing writing to pure materiality.'²⁰ In such a way, the orality of the azan, namely that which offers spiritual comfort for Muslims and the textuality of azan that asks Muslims to quarantine at home and not congregate, are both circumvented and reduced to the problem of loudspeakers, that is, a problem of digi-

tal amplification. The court's understanding of the problem is that azan involves noise pollution, but not an understanding that loudspeakers try to amplify the human voice of the imam amidst the white noise of modernism.²¹

In elucidating a creative possibility for Indian secularism, Shiv Visvanathan further notes that 'Indian secularism cannot not engage with religion but must create a communicative relationship with it.'²² In trying to rescue the secular demeanour of the technological invention, loudspeaker, from the religious parochiality of Islamic tradition, the Allahabad HC fails to cultivate a 'communicative relationship' with the Islamic tradition of azan, thereby denying the engagement with orality and textuality of azan. The anxiety of the secularist modern court that prohibits the technological present for religious traditions simultaneously frames the Muslim as one who belongs to their past, reifying the Hindutva imaginary, and religion as something that doesn't have a place under secularism.

21. Here I want the reader to understand that the argument goes beyond and against transhumanism that is the need for technological devices and apparatus, as inventions of human intelligence or the mind, to transcend the corporeal limitations of the body; so, it goes against the need to amplify the low decibels of human voices with human invention. Technology as that which enables the mind to transcend the limitation of human corporeality or body reifies the mind-body dualism of modernist thinking. Rather the argument is that the technological constitution of industrialized world where white noise has come to be a phenomenon that affects silence, voice and hearing, mandates such amplification if the Muslim is to live, with spiritual comfort, in the technological world that defines the present moment. For a critique of transhumanism and bodily limitation, see M. Hall, *The Bioethics of Enhancement: Transhumanism, Disability, and Biopolitics*. Lexington Books, New York, 2016.

22. Shiv Visvanathan, 'Confessions of a Troubled Secularist', *Asian Age*, 23 August 2012. <http://archive.asianage.com/columnists/confessions-troubled-secularist-053>.

John Cage's musical piece, 4'33", explicates silence as (filled with) white noise after modernity. The piece has only one note in so much as it allows for the ambient noise produced in the opera house as that which exists and makes music possible – 'what previously lay dormant outside the scope of our attention [i.e., white noise] becomes possibility [for music]'.²³ Confronted by multiple legal, media and technological modalities of silencing, the silence of the Indian Muslim should necessarily be understood as (filled with) white noise of Hindutva, a project of modernizing Hinduism established with its claim to the Indic lands of the Indian subcontinent, Bharatvarsha.

In such a way, the need to silence the azan is not about rendering Indian Muslims unfamiliar or silencing them by restricting Islamic traditions from the roads and occupying it with newer traditions of New India such as lynching. But rather, the need felt by the Allahabad HC and many other proponents of reduced 'noise pollution', is about the existing sense of unfamiliarity with 'communally responsible' behaviour of the Muslims of India in the Hindu psyche that makes it impossible to deal with the text or the oral tradition of the azan. Noise pollution seems rational as against the text or the oral tradition of the azan.

Hence, the premise of this essay – in order to do the silencing and establish hegemony, Hindu Rashtra (and its liberals) needs 'the Indian Muslim' as an invisible presence that can continue to haunt the imaginary of partitioned India so a New India, along the lines of Hindutva, can be established. With-

23. John Cage and Joan Retallack, 'Introduction' (essay), in *Musicage: Cage Muses on Words, Art, Music: John Cage in Conversation with Joan Retallack*. Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, 1996, pp. xxxiii.

19. Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks: 1800-1900*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1990.

20. Ibid., p. 184.

out referring to the Indian Muslim and constant insistence on negating them, the self of Hindu Rashtra cannot be constituted.

The images using which this essay emotes, rigidifies what they refer to by multiple media enactments of alter-referentiality, i.e. *encoding* the other in order to constitute the self through a constant process of negation. Alter-referentiality particularly concerns itself with the process of encoding who the other is in order to establish alterity, the state of otherness. Hence, the images concretize who the Indian Muslim is – an image of the Muslim, the terrorist and the invisible presence unified into a monolith that continues to haunt the securitarian imaginary of partitioned India in an attempt to establish India as a Hindu Rashtra.

Such an image allows for political enactments of marginalization of the Other to render possible the New India, seen in the 2019 election manifesto of the BJP, and the first Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's grammar in the Constituent Assembly Debates. *Indeed, it is the Indian Muslim who is allowed to exist in India and not the Muslims of India.* The hermeneutics of collective experience in search of the multiple truths concerning alterity in India hence rests in the deeply fragmented nature of Muslim communities of India, namely, Tabliqis, Thowheedis and the more general Shia, Sunni and Sufi communities, rather than the image that haunts New India: the Indian Muslim. In such a way, the Muslims of India are the ones actually rendered invisible (to which Shaheen Bagh is an antithesis) while 'Indian Muslim' is retained as an invisible presence, a spectre, that haunts New India allowing for their bodies to be tormented on the roads to create the spectacle of the making of New India.

To that extent, the anxiety of an invisible coronavirus acquires a manifestation using the images of the Indian Muslim, concretized by the symbolism of the green cap – the Twitter image that inspired this essay. Second, the term sleeper spreaders dislocate the behaviour of the Tabliqi Jamat from matters of civil irresponsibility and locates it in the terrain of terrorism, thereby reifying the image of the Indian Muslim: the monolith that is produced through alter-referentiality and conflation of the Muslims, the terrorist and the invisible presence. The image of 'Indian Muslim' or the monolithic identity, occupies the painful voids of pulmonary spasm as it materializes into that which the Hindu Rashtra is anxious about, and in this case the invisible but very haunting presence of the coronavirus. In such a way, the spectre of Indian Muslim haunts India's Covid experience.

First, for Derrida and Stiegler, spectre is 'the invisible visible' and 'it is the visibility of the body that is not present in flesh and blood.'²⁴ That is not to say Indian Muslim is an abstract conceptual category that is immaterial or non-corporeal. The pain of being Indian Muslims is felt in flesh and blood on the roads of the New India that is being established as (or becoming) Hindu Rashtra (imagine mob lynching). In such a way, 'the spectre' of Indian Muslim 'is already constituent of [the] material reality' of Hindu Rashtra.²⁵ This conceptual category has material effects that shapes pasts,

24. See Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, 'Spectrographies', in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghost and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*. Bloomsbury Academic, New York, 2013, pp. 37-52. Here, I am reminded of Mirza Ghalib's Ghazal 'Ragon men daudte phirne ke hum nahin qaayal. Jab aankh hi se na tapka to phir lahu kya hai.' I interpret it as Ghalib trying to point out the impossibility of thinking about blood which generally runs through the arteries if it is not expressed as

presents and futures of Muslims of India, their multiple and varied life worlds and livelihood, and the belongingness to the lands they occupy.

Second, the conflation of Muslims, terrorist and the invisible presence to produce the alter-referential category of Indian Muslim is subjectively objective. To say that is not to categorize the conflation as merely an act of bias, but as something that was achieved through a century-long mobilization of Hindu subjectivity through the process of alter-referentiality oriented towards the establishment of Hindu Rashtra, the objective. This involved the spectacle of the Partition and the state-induced genocide that accompanied it, India-Pakistan matches, mob lynchings, sermons at Shakhas and capital punishment for terrorists like Ajmal Kasab. The strangeness, the ghostly presence, and the invisible visibility of the Indian Muslims converge in the production of the image of the Indian Muslim so that Hindu Rashtra commits to sustaining the perpetual haunting of the Indian Muslim (making them the invisible visible that is what's seeable) over the spectropolitical landscapes of New India and/or Hindu Rashtra.

Spectralities and hauntology literature often discusses spectre or ghosts

tears. Hence, in this paper, I ask, 'who is a real Muslim in flesh and blood and how does that Muslim manifest their identity in the context of New India?' One answer this paper provides is that such an object without flesh and blood is the 'Indian Muslim'. In fact, the bodies tormented on the roads are Indian Muslims and not, Muslims of India as the blood that drips from their flesh is made oblivious to any forms of diatopical seeing and sensing, in so much the act of lynching is to reinforce the spectre of Indian Muslim.

25. Arjun Appadurai, 'Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai', in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghost and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*. Bloomsbury Academic, New York, 2013, pp. 151-74.

as the 'invisible' presence in the traumatic experience of the marginalized subject whom the spectre haunts (think of how holocaust haunts the Jews). However, the use of spectre in this paper suggests that the intentional manoeuvring and production of spectre to enable the recognition of subjecthood that experiences the manoeuvred spectre to be traumatizing so that new worlds like that of Hindu Rashtra can be formulated. Hence, trauma is not simply 'the hidden core of memory', a predetermined psychological explanation, but a product of deeply politicized and ideological memory work and anthropogenic production of pasts that undermines historicity.²⁶

Experiencing such a predetermined trauma, the Hindus of India have manoeuvred 'the Indian Muslim' to haunt their everydayness as the spectre—as prospective tenants, as Muslim merchants with Hindu names, and as the roadside 'Sullas' who are, quoting a Twitter post, 'trained in vaginal oral sex' waiting to 'touch the g-spots' of Hindu women who after 'relaxation' offered by Muslim men and in unison with *him* are 'no more than hormonal female animals'.²⁷ The haunting-Indian-Muslim is tolerated until the manoeuvred trauma of the Muslim ghosts meets the threshold. Here again, the threshold of tolerance is not merely tested by sporadic and episodic irresponsible acts of the Indian Muslim like the Tabliqi Jamatis. Rather the threshold is predetermined to eventuate the time and circumstance that is appropriate for establishing Hindu Rashtra, the objective.

26. Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*. Bloomsbury Academic, New York, 2013, p. 13.

27. I understand this is quite perverse for the readers but the perverse underground of every power, as Zizek claims, needs to be inquired

Shiv Visvanathan's idea of cognitive justice, which demands the right of different knowledge systems, based on their commitment to sustaining diversity of life forms, to coexist, demands that such a plurality needs to 'go beyond tolerance or liberalism to an active recognition of the need for diversity'. Hence, today, as the question of azan enters the courtroom in the times of Covid, I ask, is it to do with Covid at all?²⁸ I particularly ask this because of the reduction of the azan call to its digitality, that is loudspeaker. I also particularly ask this because the court refuses to engage with its textuality — 'Sallu Fi Beyootikum' or 'Offer prayer at home'. On the textual level, this is a public health advisory that allows the Muslims of India to emerge as 'civically responsible individuals'—an aspect of Muslimness in India that remains submerged. The court's reduction of the azan to an issue of the Muslim and

into to understand the making of the self and the other, especially when they encounter (on the terrains of Love Jihad). See Slavoj Zizek, 'Looking Awry', *October* 50, Autumn 1989, pp. 30-55. doi:10.2307/778856. Hence, the problem of Love Jihad rests little in religious conversion (Islamic evangelicalism needs hermeneutical analysis by Muslims of India in all its forms) but rather stems from masculine anxiety which renders, between Hindu male subjectivity and Muslim male subjectivity, the women who loves (for every reason of fetishizing the Muslim as a cultural object) non-existent. Fanon asks, 'Still on the genital level, when a white man hates black men, is he not yielding to a feeling of impotence or of sexual inferiority?' See Frantz Fanon, 'The Fact of Blackness', in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Pluto Press, London, 1986, pp. 109-40.

28. The author is 'overwhelmed' here and desires to provide a subscript to the text or stream of consciousness. The gross generalization in the previous paragraph about Hindus of India as ones who have been engaged in the manoeuvring of the monolith—Indian Muslim—in order to establish Hindu Rashtra has an anti-thesis I need to attend to. Here I am overwhelmed by the interreligious dialogue that happened in Tamil Nadu where many Hindus of Tamil Nadu participated in the anti-citizenship amendment act protest in the artful exercise of drawing anti-CAA *kolam*/

the loudspeakers, the religious and the traditional vs. the modern and the technological, suppresses the civically responsible Muslims of India thereby allowing for the spectre of Indian Muslim, as one that needs to be tolerated until a predetermined threshold, to haunt the court's order on the issue.

I also particularly ask this because of the discomfort expressed by the court in engaging with the difficult conversation of Muslim's 'spiritual comfort' so much so that the bureaucratic order issued by the UP police is the next best thing it can talk about. But ultimately, I ask this because while the azan and Tabliqi Jamat, categorized as civically irresponsible acts amidst a global pandemic haunts India's Covid experience as spectre, where can I get a chance to mourn the dismantling of Shaheen Bagh? Are protests impossible in the times of Covid? The Black Lives Matter movement and the protest that sparked after George Floyd was murdered by the racist police structure in the United States, which stems from systems that policed Black Slave bodies, suggests otherwise.

Nietzsche, who is haunted by the white noise of technological development, Kittler states, misses the feminine voice of the mother which teaches

Rangoli, a practice of Hindus. Julia Kristeva, in *Strangers to Ourselves*, states: 'To worry or to smile, such is the choice when we are assailed by the strange; our decision depends on how familiar we are with our ghosts.' Bred by the uncanniness of Hindus of India, the decision to worry or to smile about my 'Others' is superseded by the emotion of overwhelm. In line with Virginia Woolf's words, 'I am overwhelmed with things I ought to have written about and never found the proper words', I would argue, feeling overwhelmed (by anti-CAA Kolam) is theory, writing and critique. In seeking 'proper words', I leave this act of the critical insiders by few Hindus of Tamil Nadu to the fact that it indeed happened. See Virginia Woolf, and Anne Olivier Bell, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume One 1915-1919*. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, New York, 1980.

the child to speak – not a language but ‘to speak’. While teaching a language operates at the level of textuality, teaching how to speak as an act of engagement (with the other) operates at the level of orality. Kittler notes, ‘ever since [modernism], there has been only deathly stillness and white noise in the writing room; no woman or muse offers her kiss’. Kittler explains that towards the end of the 1800s, the alphabetization of the mother’s tongue, via mandating maternal instruction for the educational establishment of the modern nation state, allowed for the child to learn the language but not how to speak. Such an act of modernity premises the commitment of human reproduction to the progress of the nation state. It is the halting of ‘all erotic exchange between orality and writing’, Kittler notes, that haunted and traumatized Nietzsche while writing.

On an epistemological level, Shaheen Bagh is one that’s deeply oral, striving to be inscribed into text and mobilizing digitally against the white noise of a modernist Hindutva. Shaheen Bagh, with the sheer presence of Muslim women in hijab challenging patriarchal Hindutva, expressed the erotica of democracy that is empathy, community care and alterity, through dissent.²⁹ Shiv Visvanathan notes, ‘What was stunning about Shaheen Bagh, as a drama, was that in the digital age it emphasized orality. It spoke. It was an utterance of freedom. Orality has a drama which the textual and digital cannot match. Orality demands a return to memory and storytelling. Shaheen Bagh demonstrated that the social contract in India now has to link oral, textual, digital and give a sanctity to the oral,

29. Shiv Visvanathan, ‘The Symbolism of Shaheen Bagh’, *Seminar* 729, May 2020. Accessed 20 June 2020. http://www.india-seminar.com/2020/729/729_shiv_visvanathan.htm.

to a world without certification where one claims citizenship through an act of connectivity or storytelling.’³⁰

While in patriarchal orders of existence the woman with hijab is the one that’s oppressed (an outdated interpretation which Žižek reworks in *Into the Archives of Islam*, to show how women in Islam are the holders of subjective truth which Islam is deeply anxious about and so veils them), in xenophobic orders of existence the woman with hijab comes to be the beholder of truths.³¹ Wearing hijab, she becomes the absolute signifier that threatens the Islamophobic subjects. The potent power of so many women in hijab stood out as I watched the interviews, one after the other. Shaheen Bagh created the spectacle of democracy, enacted in the most ‘overwhelming’ manner, to render the invisible visibility of the spectre of Indian Muslim seeable and listen-able, expressing a sensorial synaesthesia, though veiled under the hijab. It also, hence, expressed that visible invisibility is a difficult conversation about feminine sexuality and social contract within the communities of Muslims of India.

The communities of Muslims of India are fragmented – broader communities of Shia, Sunni and Sufi, and particular communities of Tablighi, Thowheedis, Wahhabis (little to do with Arabian Wahhabism) to name a few. Yet, in an act of coming together, they came as they were to congregate against patriarchal Hindutva and performed art³² that expressed resistance, qawallis (a Thowheedi would otherwise oppose), sermons (which expresses the

30. Ibid.

31. Slavoj Žižek, ‘Into the Archives of Islam’, in S. Žižek and B. Gunjevi, *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse*. Seven Stories Press, New York, 2012, pp. 103-126.

32. *Fearless Wall at Shaheen Bagh/Shilo Shiv Suleman*. Performed by The Fearless Collective. Fearless Wall at Shaheen Bagh/Shilo Shiv

differences among Muslim sects) and the reading of the Indian Constitution (for its poetic power). In addition, the smell from Sikh langars added layers of sensorial synaesthesia to the epistemological enactment of feminine subjectivity at Shaheen Bagh ‘speaking out’ a mode for interreligious dialogue.

Shaheen Bagh spoke to the emergence of Muslims of India, where deeply bifurcated and divided Muslim communities came together to see, speak and listen to the narrative construction of dissentious democracy as it was enacted epistemologically, calling for a new social order of creative Muslims. While this paper demands the Hindus to engage with diatopical hermeneutic as an urgent and compelling task, it simultaneously allows for Muslims of India to engage in difficult conversations concerning sexuality, class and gender in Muslim communities. Let us stop talking about Tablighi Jamat and start engaging with the epistemological possibility of Shaheen Bagh.

The mediocrity of juxtaposing the irresponsible behaviour of Tablighi Jamat to the Rath Yatra or pre-dawn pooja carried out by UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, muffles any conversations about religion, science, alterity and modernity in India and reduces it to mere Hindu-Muslim divide by pointing at ‘the subjective bias’ of the Hindutva regime. In doing so it reifies modernist dualisms of religion vs science, faith vs truth, objective vs subjective, traditional vs modern, expert vs lay and modernity vs parochiality. To talk about issues that lie in between the dualistically established categories is to talk with difficulty. Towards more difficult conversations and the creative Muslim order that’s emergent, (lal) Salaam.

Suleman, 1 April 2020. Accessed 21 June 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y48uBRjGQvE>.

The pandemic and the Tibetan students

MOUSUMI MUKHERJEE

The racist behaviour towards our ethnicity has increased since the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic. We have been treated as if we have brought the virus to this society.

The most recent experience of racism that I experienced was during our trip to Goa in March, right when the lockdown was announced. People called us 'Corona' and saying 'Go away, you, Chinese' in addition to the rude ways they behaved towards us.

We had many Indian friends from North East in the group, who were also treated no different. We are all born in India and it is like a second home to us, Tibetans.

We are thankful to the country and its people. But this behaviour is not tolerable. The beauty of India has always been in the diversity of its culture and religions that make it so unique.

We are a part of it and we want change in the unhealthy mindset of those who are treating us in racist manner.

THE above vignette from an interview I conducted recently with a Tibetan-Indian college student in Delhi, born in Manali, Himachal Pradesh, tells the unfortunate story of racist profiling that many Tibetan and Indian students from the Northeast are facing now in the middle of the Coronavirus pandemic in India. In this article, I will specifically focus on the experiences of Tibetan students and how their cultural rights are being violated because of racist profiling as Northeast Indians or Chinese.

My research seeking to learn about Tibetan student experiences began last year as part of a larger project to study the experiences of different groups of international students studying in India. The Tibetan students are not officially accounted for in the official Indian government statistics as International students studying in India. Their identity somewhere disappears in the government accounts on

both domestic and international students. In many college campuses, they are officially treated as any other domestic student, as many of them are first-generation Tibetans born in India.

However, since some of them are born in Tibet and came to India only while in high school or even later after high school for college degrees, they are treated as international students. Hence, Tibetan students have to manage a complex maze of identity challenges within the mainstream Indian higher education system.

Moreover, my research findings reveal that Tibetan students are also facing a very unfortunate issue of racist attacks following the recent global coronavirus pandemic. Tibetan students and the community at large have been facing denial of their cultural rights for a long time, even prior to the pandemic. The Tibetan cultural rights are not just jeopardized by Chinese occupation of Tibet and forceful promotion of mainstream Chinese language and culture through schooling,¹ Tibetan cultural rights are being also violated in India because of mainstream Indian ignorance about Tibet and constant racist profiling of Tibetan students as Northeast Indians, who are also denied their cultural and citizenship rights by the mainstream Indian society.

Northeast Indian students have historically faced racist profiling and discrimination within the larger mainstream Indian context. Often they are

1. G. Postiglione, 'Dislocated Education: The Case of Tibet', *Comparative Education Review* 53(4), 2009, pp. 483-512. doi:10.1086/603616

treated badly with racist slurs, such as ‘Nepali’ or ‘Chinki’, because of their East Asian or Mongoloid features. Many incidents have been reported in the media before. The racist imaginary of mainstream Indian society and poor treatment of Northeast Indians have been documented and also critiqued by a number of academics.² In recent times, following the pandemic, a number of racist incidents involving Northeast Indians have been reported in the media and comparisons have been made with the spike of racism in the United States following the pandemic.³

However, in this article I will specifically focus on the experiences of the Tibetan students based on my own ethnographic research with the Tibetan student community over the past one year. Drawing on ethnographic evidence and Clammer’s theorising⁴ of the concept of ‘cultural rights’, this article will also analyse how the Tibetan Youth-led civil society organization, the Tibetan Youth Congress, has been campaigning using the new digital social media to educate people about the cause of Free Tibet and to also fight for their cultural rights faced with racist discrimination in India as Northeast Indians or Chinese.

2. D. McDuaie-Ra, “‘Is India Racist?’ Murder, Migration and Mary Kom”, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38 (2), 2015, pp. 304-19; K. Samson, ‘North-east and Chinky: Countenances of Racism in India’, *Journal of Development Practice* 3, 2017, pp. 20-28; T. Ngaihte, ‘Nido Taniam and the Fraught Question of Racism in India’, *Economic & Political Weekly* 49(11), 2014, pp. 15-17; J.J.P. Wouters and B.S. Tanka, ‘The “Indian Face”, India’s Northeast, and “The Idea of India”’, *Asian Anthropology* 12(2), 2013, pp. 126-40.

3. N. Kipgen, ‘COVID-19 Pandemic and Racism in the United States and India’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 55(23), 2020, pp. 22-26.

4. J. Clammer, *Cultural Rights and Justice: Sustainable Development, the Arts and the Body*. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2019.

The Coronavirus pandemic began spreading around the world from Wuhan China around December 2019. In India, the situation was quite normal and number of infected people very low till the beginning of March. Things began changing rapidly with the sudden announcement of a public curfew on 22 March and then the national lockdown from 24 March.

I had to cancel my own interview schedule with students and fieldwork related to my research. Even prior to the curfew and national lockdown, a number of my research participants in Delhi colleges from the Tibetan community began reporting to me over the phone that the Himachal government had ordered all tourists to leave the state and will stop interstate buses to enter Himachal from 23 March. So, they needed to return home as they have also received notices from their hostels to leave with higher educational institutions being made to shut down from 16 March by order from the UGC (University Grants Commission) and MHRD (Ministry of Human Resource Development).

I had no choice but to postpone the interview schedules till the Fall semester. However, I kept regular communication with the students through WhatsApp messages and occasional phone calls to check on their well-being. Through these messages and phone calls, I slowly began to know about the racist profiling that some of these students were also experiencing, along with the Northeast Indian students. As the scare of Coronavirus began spreading even before the lockdown, reports on racist profiling and attacks on Northeast Indians began appearing in the newspapers with MHA (Ministry of Home Affairs) advisory asking people to stop discrimination against Northeast Indian people.⁵

However, if government orders and laws would be so effective, India

would have become a perfect democracy by now following the constitutional law, which came into force 70 years ago. Reports on racist attacks against the Northeast Indians kept pouring in through the newspapers. However, the experiences of the Tibetan student community remained invisible, subsumed under the general category of anybody with Mongoloid features as Northeast Indians or Nepali within the Indian context, who often hear racist slurs from mainstream Indians as ‘Chinki’.

I began learning about the racist attacks and discriminatory experiences that the Tibetan students were facing through my personal contacts with these students. However, just as the identity of the Tibetan students are invisible in the Indian government documents, and somewhat blurred in the college records, their experiences of racist discrimination are also invisible in the public discourse and media.

I was not surprised when the secretary of the Tibetan Youth Congress reported to me recently that many Tibetan students across the country have requested TYC to send them ‘Free Tibet’ t-shirts out of frustration faced with racist slurs and discrimination as ‘Chinki’ carriers of the Coronavirus. By wearing these t-shirts, they want to let people know that they are not Northeast Indians or Chinese. They want to educate people about their struggle for freedom from China and the cause of ‘Free Tibet’.

Despite the negative discriminatory experiences, I found a sense of gratitude towards India among the Tibetan students I interviewed, including the current president and secretary of the Tibetan Youth Congress, both of

5. ‘Coronavirus Outbreak: MHA Advises against Discrimination of Northeast People’, *The Hindu*, 23 March 2020, [https:// www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-)

whom are my former students. India for them is not just a refuge, a safe haven compared to Chinese occupied Tibet, they see India and Indians as their primary ally to fight against Chinese government aggression in Tibet. They have also gained inspiration from Gandhi's nonviolent freedom movement and strategies of nonviolent protests during British rule in India.

In fact, one of the student, Kalden, who recently returned from New York after completing a Fulbright fellowship, told me that because of his features, most of his professors and classmates identified him with East Asian and Chinese students in class. But, he himself befriended Indian students.

Kalden was born in Mundgod, Karwar district, in the state of Karnataka, and did his schooling in Bylakuppe and Bangalore University before receiving a Fulbright scholarship. This student reported that he had experienced racist behaviour in India even before the Coronavirus pandemic. Though he spoke Kannada fluently, as he was born in Karnataka, local people, including auto-rickshaw drivers did not accept him as a local and was always asked where he came from.

Once while he was standing in a queue inside his college campus, some students got engaged in a scuffle. Though he was not involved, a parent pointed a finger at him, saying: 'This is not Nagaland. Go back to your state and create trouble!' Despite this experience, the student explained it away as being due to a lack of multicultural education. He further emphasized that though people often looked down on the study of humanities and ethnic studies, it can help us become better human beings. During an interview, he stated: 'Society looks down at the humanities studies. But, I think this is why the people (especially those involved in subjects such as engineering and medicine)

IMAGE1
Poster of a recent rally in New York and Toronto following the Galwan valley conflict with the Chinese troops



lack in understanding diverse perspectives and cultural attitudes.'

Another student, Dalha, also expressed a similar sentiment. She stated: 'As the saying goes, little knowledge is dangerous. We need to educate people to remove misunderstandings and unhealthy rumours; education is a must. Letting others know the other side of the story will surely let them realise the consequences of their racist action. Moreover, the society that ceases to accept differences will never grow. But, the racist behaviour towards our ethnicity has increased since the Corona pandemic. We have been treated as if we have brought the virus to this society.'

'In response to the racist behaviour, we try to educate people and tell them we are part of this great country just as much as they are. Recently, when there was a conflict in the Indo-Chinese border, many Tibetans and Indians from the Northeast were in the front lines to defend the country, just as the Indian army. I have shared the stories on many social media platforms. This is one way I try to educate people.'

Through my phone conversations with former students now heading the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC), I came to know that they have doubled-up their efforts in the middle of the pandemic, utilizing digital social media-led campaigns, to educate people and raise more awareness about the cause of 'Free Tibet'. According to the TYC leadership, this was the only way to stop racist discrimination against Tibetans as carriers of the Coronavirus and to also increase international pressure on the Chinese government for greater accountability regarding the way they managed the Coronavirus pandemic and also the Tibet issue. 'Make China Accountable 2020' and 'Global Movement to Boycott Made in China' are two major digital social media campaigns launched by TYC in the middle of the lockdown and the pandemic.

Though TYC is utilizing digital social networking sites to spread their campaigns globally, and to educate people about the cause of 'Free Tibet' and Chinese government atrocities to suppress their cultural rights and identity, I found a good deal of compassion and sensitivity among the TYC leadership for Chinese people in general. One of the TYC leaders clearly stated during our recent phone conversation: 'Our nonviolent fight is against the authoritarian Chinese government, not against the Chinese people. In fact, boycotting Chinese goods will probably release many Chinese workers from the factories that are sweatshops, where they are forced to work under the authoritarian government.'

Through my interviews and informal interactions with the Tibetan students since last year, I found a distinct difference in perspective among many young Tibetans. I found that those who were born in Tibet and came to India later for studies were more passionate about the 'Free Tibet'

IMAGE2

News report of recent Tibetan rally in India following the Galwan valley conflict

TheHitavada

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Tibetans take out peace rally to pay respects to Galwan valley martyrs

■ Our Correspondent

ARJUNI MORGAON, July 10

MEMBERS of Tibetan community living in exile at Norgyeling Settlement Centre in Pratapgarh of Arjuni Morgaon tehsil of Gondia district took out a peaceful rally and staged silent demonstration in front of Tehsil Office in Arjuni Morgaon on Friday, to expressing solidarity and respect for supreme sacrifices made by Indian soldiers in Galwan valley during conflict with Chinese



View of the rally in Arjuni Morgaon.

troops.

They have also appealed people to boycott Chinese goods .

It may be recall that Tibetans are living in exile since 1959 due to the suppression by China. The Tibetan community members took out the rally from Durga Chowk and passing through the main streets of the town, reach Tehsil Office.

Tibetan Woman Association President Mrs Kunsang Dechen, Tibetan Youth Congress

(Contd on page 2)

movement of the Tibetan Youth Congress, while those students born in India had a more conciliatory attitude. For these young Tibetan-Indians, it does not matter anymore if Tibet is part of China. Tibetans are now not just in India, but are spread around the world as diaspora. For these young Tibetans (including the Karnataka, India born Fulbright scholar) more than territorial freedom of Tibet from Chinese occu-

pation, freedom of their mind to preserve Tibetan language, culture and heritage appeared to be more important.

A strong sense of injustice appeared to be troubling many of them as they struggle for their cultural rights in Tibet, in India, and other parts of the world, with regards to their own sense of identity and cultural affiliation vis-à-vis how others see them based on their physical appearance. Clammer

theorises cultural rights and justice as recognition, protection and respect for cultural diversity as a cornerstone for sustainable development.⁶ He also emphasized the critical role of the arts and social movements as transformative forces that could help bring about the necessary change to reinstate cultural rights. He writes:

‘The uncovering of the conception of cultural rights proves to be a rich and complex “anthropological” exercise – one that negotiates the global and the local, is concerned with the identification and recovery of forms of local knowledge, which respects the often radically differing epistemologies and aesthetics of different cultural systems, which seeks the preservation and protection of such systems in a dangerously culturally and linguistically homogenised world, which seeks not only to “respect” cultural rights to free expression, but to advance such rights and to establish their equality...

‘Political activism is of course the main means by which people have sought to change society. The pursuit of cultural rights however, also entails cultural activism, which can take many forms.’⁷

IMAGE3

TYC Launch of the Global Movement to Boycott Made in China



6. J. Clammer, 2019, op. cit.

Indeed, the young Tibetan students in the 21st century, and in the middle of a global pandemic, have undertaken digital social networking sites as their platform for political activism to spread awareness about Chinese occupation of Tibet and suppression of cultural rights of Tibetans. By spreading their campaigns through online petitions on Change.org⁸ and through the digital social networking sites to the Tibetan community around the world, the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC) is uniting Tibetans and their allies across geographical boundaries from Dharamshala to Delhi, New York to Toronto, and Tokyo and beyond.

A digital ethnography of their posts in these social networking sites reveals the strong desire of TYC for justice and cultural rights through recognition, protection and respect for cultural diversity, as Clammer has argued. Each and every post of the Tibetan Youth Congress on social networking sites is written in the Tibetan language and script followed by an English translation. The president of TYC and other youth leaders give speeches in Tibetan, which are then translated into English.

They take utmost care through each of these posts to educate people about the Tibetan language, culture, history, religion and the struggles of the Tibetan people to preserve their cultural rights faced with the oppression of communist authoritarian Chinese government.

As an educator, I am passionate about education and social change. The statements from the Tibetan students about the need to educate people about the cause of 'Free Tibet', Tibetan culture and society, and all the political activism they are involved in to raise awareness makes me hopeful. Global history provides us with a number of examples to show that such forceful suppression of people's cultural rights after forceful occupation of their lands, often leads to a strong backlash.

Some countries, such as the United States, Canada, South Africa and Australia are now seeking the path of reconciliation for injustices they have done in the past to the indigenous communities, whose lands the white settlers from Europe occupied. Within the Asian context, we have seen a number of forceful overturning of Imperial

power to establish self-rule or 'swaraj' by people of the local community. India stands out as one of the forerunners in the 'swaraj' movement for territorial freedom and self-rule led by the Indian National Congress under the nonviolent leadership of Gandhi fighting for justice and freedom.

During my research with the students in the Tibetan community, I observed a strong desire among many Tibetan students born in India for recognition, preservation and respect of their cultural rights, rather than a strong desire for 'Free Tibet'. Though the desire for 'Free Tibet' is very strong mostly among students born in Tibet, faced with discrimination as Chinese virus in the middle of the pandemic, TYC has received requests even from many Tibetan students born in India for 'Free Tibet' t-shirts now. TYC has also doubled-up their campaign against the Chinese government seeking to capitalize on the current international sentiments against China because of the Coronavirus global pandemic and the emerging cold war between the US and China.

Only time will prove if 'Free Tibet' will be ever realized or if the Chinese government will ever walk the path of reconciliation like some western imperial governments through recognition, preservation and respect for cultural diversity in Chinese occupied Tibet. In the meantime, hopefully these on-site and digital campaigns by the Tibetan students will raise some awareness among the mainstream Indian society about the Tibetan community and their struggle for cultural rights against Chinese government oppression.

7. Ibid., pp. 173-174.

8. <https://www.change.org/p/secretary-general-of-united-nation-make-china-accountable-to-the-covid-19-pandemic-and-resignation-of-who-director-dr-tedros/outbreak-mha-advises-against-discrimination-of-northeast-people/article31145387>

IMAGE4

International Day of Justice campaign video on TYC social networking site



Comment

NEP 2020 on legal education

AMID the din of contrarian voices on the issue of *medium of instruction* emanating from the recently adopted National Education Policy, 2020 (hereinafter ‘NEP’), of significant concern is the cursory yet significantly damaging manner in which professional education, specifically legal education, has been dealt with therein.

The NEP dedicates barely a single paragraph towards laying down its ‘profound’ vision vis-à-vis legal education. It begins with the regular, and by-now overwhelmingly mundane, alliterations for the need to restructure legal education towards becoming ‘globally competitive’, ‘adopting the best practices’ and ‘embracing new technology’. Further, this prescription as outlined by the newly christened Ministry of Education is sought to be tempered with such ideals as ‘Constitutional values of Justice – Social, Economic, and Political – and directed towards national reconstruction through instrumentation of democracy, rule of law, and human rights.’

However, the NEPs overall vision concerning ‘Professional Education’ may be taken as heedless objective prescriptions for ailments that are very clearly subjective. Specifically taking legal education, what is of utmost concern is the almost cavalier manner in which the policy envisions its ‘discouragement’ for stand-alone law universities in the following manner:

‘20.2. ...Stand-alone agricultural universities, legal universities, health science universities, technical universities, and stand-alone institutions in other fields, shall aim to become multidisciplinary institutions offering holistic and multidisciplinary education. All institutions offering either professional or general education will aim to organically evolve into institutions/clusters offering both seamlessly, and in an integrated manner by 2030.’

Though seemingly benign, the above prescript may well be the *coup-de-grace* for various stand-alone professional education institutes/universities of excellence; it certainly sets the clock back by three decades on the reforms in legal education. What the NEP wholly fails to acknowledge is the fact that the five-year integrated LLB programme was mooted in the early 1970s as a remedy to ensure that legal education moves out of the prevalent isolated and silo-based approach. Thus by its very nature, the five-year integrated B.A./B.Sc. L.L.B. was tasked towards adopting an inter-disciplinary approach to law and its teaching.

This is precisely where the stand-alone university/institution, subsequently which came to be referred to as the National Law University (NLU), was conceived and considered innate to an integrated teaching of law, humanities and social-sciences. Therefore, the supposed novel ruminations of the NEP, 2020 had already been considered, outlined and adopted prior to the National Policy on Education, 1986.

The NLUs were born out of the need for quality professional education in the field of law. Had the law departments in various universities been offering legal education at par with the requirements of an emerging corporate white collar India, the doyen of modern legal education in India, Prof. (Dr.) N.R. Madhava Menon, would not have stated that ‘...the quality of legal education imparted in these colleges declined from the professional perspective.’¹

With more than three decades since the established of the first NLU, i.e. the National Law School of India University, Bangalore (NLSIU) in 1986, it can be no ones case that the experiment has failed. In fact, its further emulations in Hyderabad, Kolkata, Bhopal and Delhi to name a few have only furthered the benchmark

1. *The Birth of National Law School* (available at <https://law.careers360.com/articles/birth-of-national-law-school>)

of excellence in the field of professional legal education. Therefore, for the NEP to advocate a winding back of the clock is counterintuitive to say the least.

Nonetheless, my *ex-facie* disagreement with the NEP in this regard ought not be taken as an attempt to gloss over the multitude of issues at the NLUs ranging from limited accessibility, high tuition fee, inbreeding of teaching staff and infrastructural issues to an overarching inclination towards corporate law. To add to this, for the longest the University Grants Commission (UGC) did not deem it fit to provide adequate funding to these NLUs and this led to a *quid pro quo* situation whereby the respective state governments demanded a domiciliary quota in return for financial assistance.

However, these limitations do not in the least warrant that stand-alone National Law Universities be relegated to functioning as mere law departments in a larger establishment or to unnecessarily operate in clusters merely to be in line with a flawed policy that does not understand the associated professional requirements of the field. The NEP gives no notable advancement in policy direction toward enlarging the scope of interface between legal practitioners and law schools. In fact, unnecessarily stringent and somewhat dilatory considerations vis-à-vis faculty at law schools (both NLUs and non-NLUs) has for decades now detracted from greater infusion of the practical industry centric knowledge and expertise and unfortunately shall continue to do so under the new policy.

In conclusion, attention must be drawn to another suggestion wherein the NEP ordains that, '20.4. ...State institutions offering law education must consider offering bilingual education for future lawyers and judges – in English and in the language of the State in which the law programme is situated.'

The above proposition outlines the fundamental lack of understanding of the NLU model and unfortunately plays right into the hands of advocates of domiciliary reservations. The NLUs were always meant to cater to the best of talent from across the nation and in that there was a tacit acceptance that the graduating batch will invariably spread across the various legal hubs across the nation. Therefore, for instance a student from Mumbai coming to study at the National Law School of India University, Bangalore will in all probability not practise law in the state of Karnataka and would thus have no utility in being taught law in the Kannada language.

In memoriam

Ebrahim Alkazi 1925-2020

HE believed the devil was in the detail. I was his student. He was fastidious and meticulous. A staunch disciplinarian, he directed and ruled his community of students with singleminded passion to achieve a level of perfection that other institutions did not demand with the same, strict determination. Excellence was his endeavour and he instilled that sensibility in all of us who were privileged to have him as our teacher. There were no cutting corners permitted, no clumsy and careless interventions allowed. To think through every move, to use the mind to question and debate, listen and argue till convinced, was what he taught me. That precious legacy has remained the bedrock of my life.

I first met Alkazi as a young girl in Bombay when I went with my parents to see a play he had directed, staged on the roof terrace of the building where he lived with his family. He had designed an open air, rooftop theatre where his passion kept his spirit alive. His wife and children, the extended family, friends and acquaintances, all gathered regularly to witness the performances he staged. But that memory remains blurred and distant.

A decade later, Alkazi had become the Director of the National School of Drama in New Delhi, and had begun to impact, dramatically, the cultural scene in the capital. At the time, I was a senior at Modern School, very interested in theatre, film and the arts, an interest that became the mainstay of everything I did thereon. My parents were an intrinsic part of that larger crea-

tive and cultural fraternity. Writers, artists, poets, filmmakers, actors, directors were in and out of our home and I was naturally drawn to them and their work. The experience was profound and solid. I acted in plays at school and spent most of my time in the art room. Everything else was secondary. At university my priorities were exactly like they were at school and I found I had been expelled from Miranda House after I completed the first year.

I then decided to follow what was my passion. Theatre. I applied to join the National School of Drama and went to meet Alkazi. School had already started and he spent an hour discouraging me to join, scaring me off by saying the plays would be in Hindi and that I was not fluent and comfortable in the language; that the students came from across India, and from varying backgrounds, and that I would not fit in with ease. Finally, I persuaded him to let me sit for the entrance exam, albeit late, and take it from there. I recall a piece I had to enact from *Andha Yug*, a silo... of Gandhari, after which there was a rigorous viva. I was admitted for a three-year course to train as a theatre director.

Ebrahim Alkazi had a larger than life persona, the kind they do not make anymore. He encompassed a fund of knowledge and exuded the confidence that comes with ongoing learning. He came from a landscape that was peopled by progressives, men and women who were experimenting with their craft, in the wide

and exciting realm of the arts and literature. They were 'collectors' of both the intangible and the tangible. They were all history in the making. India was a newly independent nation state and these professionals were influencing and impacting film and theatre, literature and art, dance and music. The list was long and diverse. His wife, Roshan, came from a family of active practitioners in the arts, Bobby Padamsee and Alyque, Akbar Padamsee the great painter. She mastered costume design and was responsible for dressing all the characters in the plays he directed. Research was the key and she taught us, as students, how to conjure up the wardrobe for characters in a play and establish time and place in its historical context. Every prop mattered as did the colour and texture of the costume. Their two children, Amal and Feisal, grew up in this 24x7 theatre space. It was their life. It anchored them and both have carried further the passion and commitment to theatre that their parents had imbibed in them. Amal married a medical doctor, Nisar Allana, who very quickly became a set designer of excellence. Theatre enveloped them all. They lived, ate, slept theatre.

For me, he was a saviour, a mentor, a guide, friend and philosopher. He ignited a range of emotions, from awe to supreme aggravation, onto anger and then, affection. He devoted himself fully to his students, to the institution and to the cause of theatre. He instilled in us the discipline of team spirit, of learning and asking questions, of thinking out of the box, of research and the exploration of ideas, of the importance of observation and dissection, of reflection, all of which compelled a respect for diverse views and opinions. When we did a Chekhov play, we had to read and study the period it was set in; what was happening in the world at the time; what did people wear; what was the cuisine in Russia; what was the style and design of the architecture, the furniture, the gardens and more. The range of the experience was overwhelming. From the folk traditions of India to the classical, from *Jasma Odan* to *Mrichakatikam*; from Shakespeare to Bertolt Brecht, *Othello* to *Caucasian Chalk Circle*; it was an infinite experience that kept unfolding histories and stories of the past and the present. The diversity was staggering, as was the learning. The world was his stage, the stage was his world, and we peopled it for the years we were at the NSD.

Great actors were born under his tutelage. Manohar Singh, Uttara Baokar, Surekha Sikri, Om Puri, Raj Babbar, Nadira Babbar, M.K. Raina, Naseeruddin Shah, Amal Alkazi Allana, Meena Walwalkar and many more confidently carried forward the profes-

sional spirit and expertise that he instilled in his student community. Some joined the film industry, others were linked to both film and theatre. The range of productions he staged, from *Danton's Death* to *Andha Yug*, from *Medea*, *Yerma*, *Cherry Orchard*, to *Hori*, *Jasma Odan*, *Three Penny Opera* that was translated into Teen Takke ka Swang, and *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, to an experiment with Kabuki as a form, and more, all translated into Hindi, he encapsulated a trajectory of world history, in time and space, in both his teaching and sharing. The training, apart from reading and understanding scripts and texts in their historical contexts, included costume and set design, the study of theatre architecture be it the Koothambalam in Kerala, the amphitheatre of the Greeks, to the Proscenium and Black Box, the mastering of makeup techniques and also competence in carpentry. The teaching faculty was excellent, all greats in their fields. He created the Meghdoot theatre alongside Rabindra Bhavan where the NSD was housed. It was an open air 'auditorium' where the seating area was as deep as the performance space and where, for its inauguration with Premchand's *Hori*, an entire village was built and inhabited to ensure the best of realism. We as students helped build Meghdoot and it gave us all a sense of ownership, ownership of our professional domain.

Like theatre captured the spirit of times past and present, so did his second avatar as a gallerist, a voracious collector and meticulous archivist. His eye was a sharp lens that wanted to probe and discover images and icons that told the many truths and unending stories of humankind. His life was a stage where 'histories' entered and exited. He too will become an important 'history' of our times. His collection of photography, through time, is priceless. He was a fine painter himself and Amal recently exhibited his works at Art Heritage, a gallery he set up at Triveni Kala Sangam, with Roshan.

He will be recalled and remembered as a man who followed his passion and, like an enigmatic leader, impassioned his followers. I was privileged. He was my guru, he put me on track and gave me the confidence I needed to follow my many aspirations. When I moved on and away, his enduring spirit guided and directed me, silently but surely, into my unknown future. The energy, compassion and spirit of Ebrahim Alkazi, an institution of his time, will live on as an important milestone in the contemporary history of India.

Malvika Singh
Publisher, *Seminar*